

# Homeric Hymn to Demeter

Translated by Gregory Nagy

I begin to sing of Demeter, the holy goddess with the beautiful hair.

And her daughter [Persephone] too. The one with the delicate ankles,  
whom Hādēs<sup>1</sup>

seized. She was given away by Zeus, the loud-thunderer, the one who  
sees far and wide.

Demeter did not take part in this, she of the golden double-axe, she who  
glories in the harvest.

- 5 She [Persephone] was having a good time, along with the daughters of  
Okeanos, who wear their waistbands slung low.

She was picking flowers: roses, crocus, and beautiful violets.

Up and down the soft meadow. Iris blossoms too she picked, and  
hyacinth.

And the narcissus, which was grown as a lure for the flower-faced girl

by Gaia [Earth]. All according to the plans of Zeus. She [Gaia] was doing  
a favor for the one who receives many guests [Hādēs].

- 10 It [the narcissus] was a wondrous thing in its splendor. To look at it gives  
a sense of holy awe

to the immortal gods as well as mortal humans.

It has a hundred heads growing from the root up.

Its sweet fragrance spread over the wide skies up above.

And the earth below smiled back in all its radiance. So too the churning  
mass of the salty sea.

- 15 She [Persephone] was filled with a sense of wonder, and she reached out  
with both hands

to take hold of the pretty plaything.<sup>2</sup> And the earth, full of roads leading  
every which way, opened up under her.

It happened on the Plain of Nysa. There it was that the Lord who receives many guests made his lunge.

He was riding on a chariot drawn by immortal horses. The son of Kronos. The one known by many names.

He seized her against her will, put her on his golden chariot,

20 And drove away as she wept. She cried with a piercing voice,

calling upon her father [Zeus], the son of Kronos, the highest and the best.

But not one of the immortal ones, or of human mortals,

heard her voice. Not even the olive trees which bear their splendid harvest.

Except for the daughter of Persaios, the one who keeps in mind the vigor of nature.

25 She heard it from her cave. She is Hekatē, with the splendid headband.

And the Lord Helios [Sun] heard it too, the magnificent son of Hyperion.

They heard the daughter calling upon her father, the son of Kronos.

But he, all by himself, was seated far apart from the gods, inside a temple, the precinct of many prayers.

He was receiving beautiful sacrificial rites from mortal humans.

30 She was being taken, against her will, at the behest of Zeus,

by her father's brother, the one who makes many *sēmata*, the one who receives many guests,

the son of Kronos, the one with many names. On the chariot drawn by immortal horses.

So long as the earth and the star-filled sky

were still within the goddess's [Persephone's] view, as also the fish-swarming sea [*pontos*], with its strong currents,

35 as also the rays of the sun, she still had hope that she would yet see

her dear mother and that special group, the immortal gods.

For that long a time her great *noos* was soothed by hope, distressed as she was.

The peaks of mountains resounded, as did the depths of the sea [*pontos*], with her immortal voice. And the Lady Mother [Demeter] heard her.

40 And a sharp *akhos* seized her heart. The headband on her hair she tore off with her own immortal hands and threw a dark cloak over her shoulders.

She sped off like a bird, soaring over land and sea,

looking and looking. But no one was willing to tell her the truth [*etētuma*],

45 not one of the gods, not one of the mortal humans, not one of the birds, messengers of the truth [*etētuma*].

Thereafter, for nine days did the Lady Demeter

wander all over the earth, holding torches ablaze in her hands.

Not once did she take of ambrosia and nectar, sweet to drink,

50 in her grief, nor did she bathe her skin in water.

But when the tenth bright dawn came upon her,

Hekatē came to her, holding a light ablaze in her hands.

She came with a message, and she spoke up, saying to her:

“Lady Demeter, bringer of *hōrai*, giver of splendid gifts,

55 which one of the gods who dwell in the sky or which one of mortal humans seized Persephone and brought grief to your *philos thūmos*?

I heard the sounds, but I did not see with my eyes

who it was. So I quickly came to tell you everything, without error.”

So spoke Hekatē. But she was not answered

60 by the daughter [Demeter] of Rhea with the beautiful hair. Instead, she [Demeter] joined her [Hekatē] and quickly

set out with her, holding torches ablaze in her hands.

They came to Hēlios, the seeing-eye of gods and men.

They stood in front of his chariot-team, and the resplendent goddess asked this question:

“Helios! Show me respect [*aidōs*], god to goddess, if ever

65 I have pleased your heart and *thūmos* in word or deed.

It is about the girl born to me, a sweet young seedling, renowned for her beauty,

whose piercing cry I heard resounding through the boundless aether,

as if she were being forced, though I did not see it with my eyes.

I turn to you as one who ranges over all the earth and sea [*pontos*]

70 as you look down from the bright aether with your sunbeams:

tell me without error whether you have by any chance seen my *philon* child,

and who has taken her away from me by force, against her will,

and then gone away? Tell me which one of the gods or mortal humans did it.”

So she spoke. And the son of Hyperion answered her with these words:

75 “Daughter of Rhea with the beautiful hair, Queen Demeter!

You shall know the answer, for I greatly respect you and feel sorry for you as you grieve over your child, the one with the delicate ankles. No one else

among all the immortals is responsible [*aitios*] except the cloud-gatherer

Zeus himself,

who gave her to Hādēs as his beautiful wife.

So he gave her to his own brother. And he [Hādēs], heading for the misty realms of darkness,

80 seized her as he drove his chariot and as she screamed out loud.

But I urge you, goddess: stop your loud cry of lamentation: you should not

have an anger without bounds, all in vain. It is not unseemly

to have, of all the immortals, such a son-in-law as Hādēs,

the one who makes many *sēmata*.

85 He is the brother [of Zeus], whose seed is from the same place. And as for *tīmē*,

he has his share, going back to the very beginning, when the three-way division of inheritance was made.<sup>3</sup>

He dwells with those whose king he was destined by lot to be."<sup>4</sup>

So saying, he shouted to his horses, and they responded to his command

as they swiftly drew the speeding chariot, like long-winged birds.

90 And she [Demeter] was visited by grief [*akhos*] that was even more terrifying than before: it makes you think of the Hound of Hādēs.

In her anger at the one who is known for his dark clouds, the son of Kronos,

she shunned the company of gods and lofty Olympus.

She went away, visiting the cities of humans, with all their fertile landholdings,

shading over her appearance, for a long time. And not one of men,

95 looking at her, could recognize her. Not one of women, either, who are accustomed to wear their waistbands low-slung.<sup>5</sup>

Until, one day, she came to the house of bright-minded Keleos,  
who was at that time ruler of Eleusis, fragrant with incense.<sup>6</sup>

She sat down near the road, sad in her *philon* heart,

at the well called Parthenion [the Virgin's Place], where the people of the  
*polis*<sup>7</sup> used to draw water.

100 She sat in the shade, under the thick growth of an olive tree,

looking like an old woman who had lived through many years and who is

deprived of giving childbirth and of the gifts of Aphrodite, lover of garlands  
in the hair.

She was like those nursemaids who belong to kings, administrators of  
*themistes*,

and who are guardians of children in echoing palaces.

105 She was seen by the daughters of Keleos, son of Eleusinos,

who were coming to get water, easy to draw [from the well], in order to  
carry it

in bronze water-jars to the *phila* home of their father.

There were four of them, looking like goddesses with their bloom of  
adolescence:

Kallidikē, Kleisidikē, and lovely Dēmō.

110 And then there was Kallithoē, who was the eldest of them all.

They did not recognize her [Demeter]. Gods are hard for mortals to see.

They [the daughters] stood near her and spoke these winged words:

“Who are you, and where are you from, old woman, old among old  
humans?

Why has your path taken you far away from the *polis*? Why have you not  
drawn near to the palace?

115 There, throughout the shaded chambers, are women

who are as old as you are, and younger ones too,  
who would welcome you in word and in deed.”

So she spoke.<sup>8</sup> And the Lady Goddess spoke with the following words:

“*Phila* children! Whoever women you are among the female kind of humans,

120 I wish you *kharis* [‘I wish you pleasure and happiness from our relationship, starting now’]. I shall tell you. It is not unseemly,  
since you ask, for me to tell you *alēthea*.

Dōsō<sup>9</sup> is my name. It was given to me by my honored mother.

But that was then. I am from Crete, having traveled over the wide stretches of sea

against my will. Without my consent, by *biē*, by duress,

125 I was abducted by pirates. After a while,

sailing with their swift ship, they landed at the harbor of Thorikos. There the ship was boarded by women

of the mainland, many of them. They [the pirates]

started preparing dinner next to the prow of the beached ship.

But my *thūmos* did not yearn for food, that delight of the mind.

130 I stole away and set out to travel over the dark earth of the mainland, fleeing my

arrogant captors. This way, I stopped them

from drawing any benefit from my worth without having paid the price.

That is how I got here, in the course of all my wanderings. And I do not know

what this land is and who live here.

135 But I pray to all the gods who abide on Olympus that you be granted  
vigorous husbands and that you be able to bear children,  
in accordance with the wishes of your parents. As for me, young girls,  
take pity.

To be honest about it, what I want is for you to name for me a house to  
go to, the house of someone, man or woman, who has *phila* children to be  
taken care of.<sup>10</sup>

I want to work for them,

140 honestly. The kind of work that is cut out for a female who has outlived  
others her own age.

I could take some newborn baby in my arms,  
and nourish him well. I could watch over his house.

I would make his bed in the inner recesses of well-built chambers,  
the royal bed. And I could see to a woman's tasks."

145 So spoke the goddess. And she was answered straightaway by the unwed  
maiden,

Kallidikē, the most beautiful of the daughters of Keleos:

"Old Mother, we humans endure the gifts the gods give us, even when we  
are grieving over what has to be.<sup>11</sup>

They [the gods] are, after all, far better than we are.

What I now say will be clear advice, and I will name for you

150 the men who have the great control, divinely given, of *tīmē* here:

the men who stand at the forefront of the *dēmos* and who protect the  
citadel of the *polis*

with their wise counsel and their straight *dikai*.

And then there are the wives too: of sound-minded Triptolemos, of  
Dioklos,

of Polyxenos, of faultless Eumolpos as well,  
155 of Dolikhos, and of our splendid father [Keleos].

The wives of all of these manage the palace.<sup>12</sup>

Of these women, not a single one of them, when they first look at you,  
would deprive you of *tīmē*, the way you look, and turn you away from the  
palace.

Rather, they will receive you. For, right now, you look like the gods.

160 If you wish, wait for us, while we go to the palace of our father  
and tell our mother, Metaneira with the low-slung waistband,  
all these things from beginning to end, in the hope that she will tell you  
to come to our house and not to seek out the houses of others.<sup>13</sup>

She has a treasured son, growing up in the well-built palace.

165 He was born late, after many a prayer for the birth of a son: a great joy to  
his parents.

If you nourish him to grow till he reaches the crossing-point of life, coming  
of age,

I can predict that you will be the envy of any woman who lays eyes on  
you.

That is how much compensation she [Metaneira] would give you in return  
for raising him."

So she [Kallidikē] spoke. And she [Demeter] nodded her assent. So they,  
170 filling their splendid jars with water, carried it off, looking magnificent.

Swiftly they came to the great palace of their father, and quickly they told  
their mother

what they saw and heard.<sup>14</sup> And she told them

quickly to go and invite her [Demeter] for whatever wages, no limits,

and they, much as deer or heifers in the *hōrā* of spring

175 prance along the meadow, satiating their dispositions as they graze on the grass,

so also they, hitching up the folds of their lovely dresses,

dashed along the rutted roadway, their hair flowing

over their shoulders, looking like crocus blossoms.

They found the illustrious goddess sitting near the road, just the way

180 they had left her. Then they led her to the *phila* palace of their father.

She was walking behind them, sad in her *philon* heart.

She was wearing a veil on her head, and a long dark robe [*peplos*]

trailed around the delicate feet of the goddess.<sup>15</sup>

Straightaway they came to the palace of sky-nurtured<sup>16</sup> Keleos.

185 They went through the hall, heading for the place where their mistress, their mother,

was sitting near the threshold of a well-built chamber,

holding in her lap her son, a young seedling. And they ran over

to her side. She [Demeter] in the meantime went over to the threshold and stood on it, with feet firmly planted, and her head

reached all the way to the ceiling. And she filled the whole indoors with a divine light.

190 She [Metaneira] was seized by a sense of *aidōs*, by a holy wonder, by a blanching fear.

She [Metaneira] yielded to her [Demeter] the chair on which she was sitting, and she told her to sit down.

But Demeter, the bringer of *hōrai*, the giver of splendid gifts,

refused to sit down on the splendid chair,

but she stood there silent, with her beautiful eyes downcast,

195 until Iambē, the one who knows what is worth caring about [*kednon*] and what is not, set down for her

a well-built stool, on top of which she threw a splendid fleece.<sup>17</sup>

On this she [Demeter] sat down, holding with her hands a veil before her face.

For a long time she sat on the stool, without uttering a sound, in her sadness.

And she made no approach, either by word or by gesture, to anyone.

200 Unsmiling, not partaking of food or drink,

she sat there, wasting away with yearning for her daughter with the low-slung waistband,

until Iambē,<sup>18</sup> the one who knows what is dear and what is not, started making fun.

Making many jokes, she turned the Holy Lady's disposition in another direction,

making her smile and laugh and have a merry *thūmos*.

205 Ever since, she [Iambē] has been pleasing her [Demeter] with the sacred rites.

Then Metaneira offered her [Demeter] a cup, having filled it with honey-sweet wine.

But she refused, saying that it was divinely ordained that she not

drink red wine. Then she [Demeter] ordered her [Metaneira] to mix some barley and water

with delicate pennyroyal, and to give her [Demeter] that potion to drink.

210 So she [Metaneira] made the *kukeōn*<sup>19</sup> and offered it to the goddess, just as she had ordered.

The Lady known far and wide as Dēō<sup>20</sup> accepted it, for the sake of the *hosia*.<sup>21</sup>

Then well-girded Metaneira spoke up in their midst:

"Woman, I wish you *kharis* ['I wish you pleasure and happiness from our relationship, starting now']. I speak this way because I think you are descended not from base parents

but from noble ones. You have the look of *aidōs* in your eyes,

215 and the look of *kharis*, just as if you were descended from kings, who uphold the *themistes*.

We humans endure the gifts the gods give us, even when we are grieving over what has to be.

The yoke has been placed on our neck.

But now that you have come here, there will be as many things that they give to you as they give to me.

Take this little boy of mine and nourish him. He is late-born, and it was beyond my expectations

220 that the immortals could have given him to me. I prayed many times to have him.

If you nourish him to grow till he reaches the crossing-point of life, coming of age,

I can predict that you will be the envy of any woman who lays eyes on you.

That is how much compensation I [Metaneira] would give you in return for raising him."

Then Demeter, with the beautiful garlands in her hair, addressed her:

225 "Woman, I wish you *kharis* back, and then some. May the gods give you good things.

With positive intentions, I will take your little boy as you tell me to.

I will nourish him, and I do not expect that, through the inadvertence of her nursemaid,

he would perish from a pestilence or from the Undercutter.<sup>22</sup>

I know an antidote<sup>23</sup> that is far more powerful than the Woodcutter;<sup>24</sup>

230 I know a genuine remedy for the painful pestilence.”

Having so spoken, she took the child to her fragrant bosom,

in her immortal hands. And the mother [Metaneira] rejoiced in her mind.

233 And so it came to pass that the splendid son of bright-minded Keleos,

234 Dēmophōn,<sup>25</sup> who was born to the one with the beautiful waist, Metaneira,

235 was nourished in the palace, and he shot up [*anedrame*] equal [*īsos*] to a  
superhuman force [*daimōn*],

236 not eating grain, not sucking from the breast. But Demeter

237 used to anoint him with ambrosia, as if he had been born of the goddess,

238 and she would breathe down her sweet breath on him as she held him to  
her bosom.

239 At nights she would conceal him within the power source [*menos*] of fire,  
as if he were a smoldering log,

240 and his dear [*philoī*] parents were kept unaware. But they marveled

241 at how full in bloom he came to be, and to look at him was like looking at  
the gods.<sup>26</sup>

Now Demeter would have made him ageless and immortal

if it had not been for the heedlessness of well-girded Metaneira,

who went spying one night, leaving her own fragrant bedchamber,

245 and caught sight of it [what Demeter was doing]. She let out a shriek and  
struck her two thighs,<sup>27</sup>

afraid for her child. She had made a big mistake in her *thūmos*.

Weeping, she spoke these winged words:

“My child! Demophon! The stranger, this woman, is making you disappear  
in a mass of flames!

This is making me weep in lamentation [*goos*]. This is giving me baneful anguish!”

250 So she spoke, weeping. And the resplendent goddess heard her.

Demeter, she of the beautiful garlands in the hair, became angry at her [Metaneira].

She [Demeter] took her [Metaneira’s] *philos* little boy, who had been born to her mother in the palace, beyond her expectations,

—she took him in her immortal hands and put him down on the floor, away from her.<sup>28</sup>

She had taken him out of the fire, very angry in her *thūmos*,

255 and straightaway she spoke to well-girded Metaneira:

“Ignorant humans! Heedless, unable to recognize in advance

the difference between future good fortune [*aisa*] and future bad.

In your heedlessness, you have made a big mistake, a mistake without remedy.

<sup>259</sup> I [= Demeter] swear by the implacable water of the Styx,<sup>29</sup> the witness of oaths that gods make, as I say this:

260 immortal and ageless for all days

<sup>261</sup> would I have made your dear [*philos*] little boy, and I would have given him honor [*tīmē*] that is unwilting [*a-phthi-tos*].<sup>30</sup>

<sup>262</sup> But now there is no way for him to avoid death and doom.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>263</sup> Still, he will have an honor [*tīmē*] that is unwilting [*a-phthi-tos*], for all time, because on my knees

<sup>264</sup> he had once sat and slept in my arms.

265 At the right season [*hōrā*], every year,

<sup>266</sup> the sons of the Eleusinians will have a war, a terrible battle among each other.

<sup>267</sup> They will do so for all days to come.<sup>32</sup>

I am Demeter, the holder of *tīmai*. I am the greatest

boon and joy for immortals and mortals alike.

270 But come! Let a great temple, with a great altar at its base,

be built by the entire *dēmos*. Make it at the foot of the acropolis and its steep walls.

Make it loom over the well of Kallikhoron,<sup>33</sup> on a prominent hill.

And I will myself instruct you in the sacred rites so that, in the future,

you may perform the rituals in the proper way and thus be pleasing to my *noos*."

275 So saying, the goddess changed her size<sup>34</sup> and appearance,

shedding her old age, and she was totally enveloped in beauty.

And a lovely fragrance wafted from her perfumed robes.

The radiance of her immortal complexion

shone forth from the goddess. Her golden hair streamed down her shoulder.

280 The well-built palace was filled with light, as if from a flash of lightning.

She went out of the palace, and straightaway her [Metaneira's] knees buckled.

For a long time she [Metaneira] was speechless. She did not even think of her treasured little boy, to pick him up from the floor.

But his sisters heard his plaintive wailing,

285 and they quickly ran downstairs from their well-cushioned bedrooms. One of them

picked up the child in her arms, clasping him to her bosom.

Another one rekindled the fire. Still another one rushed, with her delicate feet,

to prop up her mother as she was staggering out of the fragrant room.

They all bunched around the little boy, washing him as he gasped and spluttered.

290 They all kept hugging him, but his *thūmos* could not be comforted.

He was now being held by nursemaids who were far inferior.

All night they prayed to the illustrious goddess,

trembling with fear. And when the bright dawn came,

they told Keleos, who rules far and wide, exactly what happened,

295 and what the goddess Demeter, the one with the beautiful garlands in the hair, instructed them to do.

Then he [Keleos] assembled the masses of the people, from this end of the public place to the other,

and he gave out the order to build, for Demeter with the beautiful hair, a splendid temple,

and an altar too, on top of the prominent hill.

And they obeyed straightaway, hearing his voice.

300 They built it as he ordered. And the temple grew bigger and bigger, taking shape through the dispensation of the superhuman force [*daimōn*].<sup>35</sup>

When the people had finished their work and paused from their labor,

they all went home. But golden-haired Demeter

sat down and stayed there [in the temple], shunning the company of all the blessed ones [the gods].

She was wasting away with yearning for her daughter with the low-slung waistband.

305 She made that year the most terrible one for mortals, all over the Earth, the nurturer of many.

It was so terrible, it makes you think of the Hound of Hādēs. The Earth did not send up

any seed. Demeter, she with the beautiful garlands in her hair, kept them [the seeds] covered underground.

Many a curved plow was dragged along the fields by many an ox—all in vain.

Many a bright grain of wheat fell into the earth— all for naught.

310 At this moment, she [Demeter] could have destroyed the entire population of *meropes*<sup>36</sup> humans

with harsh hunger, thus depriving of their *tīmē*

the dwellers of the Olympian abodes— [the *tīmē* of] sacrificial portions of meat for eating or for burning,<sup>37</sup>

if Zeus had not noticed with his *noos*, taking note in his *thūmos*.

First, he sent Iris, with the golden wings, to summon

315 Demeter with the splendid hair, with a beauty that is much loved.

That is what he told her to do. And she obeyed Zeus, the one with the dark clouds, the son of Kronos,

and she ran the space between sky and earth quickly with her feet.<sup>38</sup>

She arrived at the city of Eleusis, fragrant with incense,

and she found in the temple Demeter, the one with the dark robe.

320 Addressing her, she spoke winged words:

“Demeter! Zeus, the one who has unwilting [*a-phthi-ta*] knowledge, summons you

to come to that special group, the company of the immortal gods.

So then, come! May what my words say, which come from Zeus, not fail to be turned into action that is completed.”

So she spoke, making an entreaty. But her [Demeter’s] *thūmos* was not persuaded.

325 After that, the Father sent out all the other blessed and immortal gods.

They came one by one,

they kept calling out to her, offering many beautiful gifts,

all sorts of *tīmai* that she could choose for herself if she joined the company of the immortal gods.

But no one could persuade her in her thinking or in her intention [*noēma*],

330 angry as she was in her *thūmos*, and she harshly said no to their words.

She said that she would never go to fragrant Olympus,

that she would never send up the harvest of the earth,

until she saw with her own eyes her daughter, the one with the beautiful looks.

But when the loud-thunderer, the one who sees far and wide, heard this,

335 he sent to Erebos [Hādēs] the one with the golden wand, the Argos-killer [Hermes],<sup>39</sup>

so that he may persuade Hādēs, with gentle words,

that he allow holy Persephone to leave the misty realms of darkness

and be brought up to the light in order to join the *daimones* [the gods in Olympus], so that her mother may

see her with her own eyes and then let go of her anger.

340 Hermes did not disobey, but straightaway he headed down beneath the depths of the earth,

rushing full speed, leaving behind the abode of Olympus.

And he found the Lord inside his palace,

seated on a funeral couch, along with his duly acquired bedmate,

the one who was much under duress, yearning for her mother, and suffering from the unbearable things

345 inflicted on her by the will of the blessed ones.<sup>40</sup>

Going near him [Hādēs] and stopping, the powerful Argos-killer said to him:

“Hādēs! Dark-haired one! King of the dead!

Zeus the Father orders that I have splendid Persephone

brought back up to light from Erebus back to him and his company, so that her mother

350 may see her with her own eyes and let go of her wrath and terrifying *mēnis*

against the immortals. For she [Demeter] is performing a mighty deed,

to destroy [root *phthi-*] the tribes of earth-born humans, causing them to be without *menos*,

by hiding the Seed underground—and she is destroying [root *phthi-*] the *tīmai*

of the immortal gods.<sup>41</sup> She has a terrifying anger, and she refuses

355 to keep company with the gods. Instead, far removed, she is seated inside a temple fragrant with incense. She has taken charge of the rocky citadel of Eleusis.”

So he spoke. Hādēs, King of the Dead, smiled

with his brows,<sup>42</sup> and he did not disobey the order of Zeus the King.

Swiftly he gave an order to bright-minded Persephone.

360 “Go, Persephone, to your mother, the one with the dark robe.

Have a kindly disposition and *thūmos* in your breast.

Do not be too upset, excessively so.

I will not be an unseemly husband to you, in the company of the immortals.

I am the brother of Zeus the Father. If you are here,

365 you will be queen of everything that lives and moves about,

and you will have the greatest *tīmai* in the company of the immortals.

Those who violate *dikē* will get punishment for all days to come

those who do not supplicate your *menos* with sacrifice, performing the rituals in a

reverent way, executing perfectly the offerings that are due.”

370 So he spoke. And high-minded Persephone rejoiced.

Swiftly she set out, with joy. But he [Hādēs]

gave her, stealthily, the honey-sweet berry of the pomegranate to eat,

peering around him.<sup>43</sup> He did not want her to stay for all time

over there, at the side of her honorable mother, the one with the dark robe.

375 The immortal horses were harnessed to the golden chariot

by Hādēs, the one who makes many *sēmata*.

She got up on the chariot, and next to her was the powerful Argos-killer,

who took reins and whip into his *philai* hands

and shot out of the palace [of Hādēs]. And the horses sped away eagerly.

380 Swiftly they made their way along the long journey. Neither the sea

nor the water of the rivers nor the grassy valleys

nor the mountain peaks could hold up the onrush of the immortal horses.

High over the peaks they went, slicing through the vast air.

He came to a halt at the place where Demeter, with the beautiful garlands in the hair,

385 was staying, at the forefront of the temple fragrant with incense. When she [Demeter] saw them,

she rushed forth like a maenad<sup>44</sup> down a wooded mountainslope.

[387-400]<sup>45</sup>

401 But when the earth starts blossoming with fragrant flowers of springtime,

flowers of every sort, then it is that you must come up from the misty realms of darkness,

once again, a great thing of wonder to gods and mortal humans alike.

But what kind of ruse was used to deceive you by the powerful one, the one who receives many guests?"<sup>46</sup>

405 She [Demeter] was answered by Persephone, the most beautiful:

"So then, Mother, I shall tell you everything, without error.

When the messenger came to me, the swift Argos-killer,

with the news from my father, the son of Kronos, and from the other dwellers in the sky,

that I should come from Erebos, so that you may see me with your own eyes

410 and let go of your wrath and terrifying *mēnis* against the immortals,

then I sprang up for joy, but he, stealthily,

put into my hand the berry of the pomegranate, that honey-sweet food,

and he compelled me by *biē* to eat of it.

As for how it was that he [Hādēs] snatched me away, through the *mētis* of the son of Kronos,

415 my father, and how he took me down beneath the depths of the earth,

I will tell you and relate in order, as you ask.

We were, all of us, going along the lovely meadow, I and

Leukippē, Phainō, Elektra, Ianthē,

Melitē, Iakhē, Rhodeia, Kallirrhoē,

420 Mēlobosis, Tykhē, and flower-faced Okyrrhoē,

Khrysēis, Ianeira, Akastē, Admētē,

Rhodopē, Ploutō, and lovely Kalypsō,

Styx, Ourania, and lovely Galaxaura.

Also Pallas [Athena], the one who rouses to battle, and Artemis, who delights in arrows.

425 We were playing and gathering lovely flowers in our hands,

an assortment of delicate crocus, iris, and hyacinth,

rosebuds and lilies, a wonder to behold,

and the narcissus, which is grown, like the crocus, by the wide earth.<sup>47</sup>

I was joyfully gathering the flowers, and then the earth beneath me

430 gave way, and there it was that he sprang out, the powerful lord who receives many guests.

He took me away under the earth in his golden chariot.

It was very much against my will. I cried with a piercing voice.

These things, grieving, I tell you, and they are all *alēthea*."

In this way did the two of them spend the whole day, having a like-minded *thūmos*,<sup>48</sup>

435 and they gladdened greatly each other's heart and *thūmos*,

hugging each other, and their *thūmos* ceased having *akhos*.

They received joy from each other, and gave it.

Then Hekatē approached them, the one with the splendid headband.

And she welcomed back the daughter of holy Demeter with many embraces.

440 And from that day forward, the Lady [Hekatē] became her [Persephone's] attendant and substitute queen.

Then the loud-thundering Zeus, who sees far and wide, sent to them a messenger,

Rhea with the beautiful hair, to bring Demeter, the one with the dark robe,

to join the company of the special group of gods. And he promised *tīmai*

that he would give to her [Demeter], which she could receive in the company of the immortal gods.

445 He [Zeus] assented that her daughter, every time the season came round,

would spend a third portion of the year in the realms of dark mist underneath,

and the other two thirds in the company of her mother and the other immortals.

So he spoke, and the goddess [Rhea] did not disobey the messages of Zeus.

Swiftly she darted off from the peaks of Olympus

450 and arrived at the Rarian Field,<sup>49</sup> the life-bringing fertile spot of land,

in former times, at least. But, at this time, it was no longer life-bringing, but it stood idle

and completely without green growth. The bright grain of wheat had stayed hidden underneath,

through the mental power of Demeter, the one with the beautiful ankles. But, from this point on,

it began straightaway to flourish with long ears of grain

455 as the springtime was increasing its power. On the field, the fertile furrows

began to be overflow with cut-down ears of grain lying on the ground, while the rest of what was cut down was already bound into sheaves.

This happened the moment she [Rhea] arrived from the boundless aether.

They [Demeter and Rhea] were glad to see each other, and they rejoiced in their *thūmos*.

Then Rhea, the one with the splendid headband, addressed her [Demeter]:

460 "Come, child, Zeus the loud-thunderer, the one who sees far and wide, is summoning you

to come to the company of that special group of gods. And he promised *tīmai*

that he would give you, which you could receive in the company of the immortal gods.

He [Zeus] assented that your daughter, every time the season comes round,

would spend a third portion of the year in the realms of dark mist underneath,

465 and the other two thirds in your company and that of the other immortals.

He has assented to all this with the nod of his head.<sup>50</sup>

So come, my child! Obey! Do not be too

stubborn in your anger at the dark-clouded son of Kronos.

Straightaway make the harvest grow, that life-bringer for humans."

470 So she spoke, and Demeter, she with the beautiful garlands in her hair, did not disobey.

Straightaway she sent up the harvest from the land with its rich clods of earth.

And all the wide earth with leaves and blossoms

was laden. Then she went to the kings, administrators of *themistes*,

and she showed them—to Triptolemos, to Diokles, driver of horses,

475 to powerful Eumolpos and to Keleos, leader of the people [*laoi*] —

she revealed to them the way to perform the sacred rites, and she pointed out the

ritual to all of them<sup>51</sup>

the holy ritual, which it is not at all possible to ignore, to find out about, or to speak

out. The great awe of the gods holds back any speaking out.

480 Blessed [*olbios*] is he among earthbound mortals who has seen these things.

But whoever is uninitiated in the rites, whoever takes no part in them, will never get a share [*aisa*] of those sorts of things [that the initiated get],

once they die, down below in the dank realms of mist.

But when the resplendent goddess finished all her instructions,

they [Demeter and Persephone] went to Olympus, to join the company of the other gods.

485 And there they abide at the side of Zeus, who delights in the thunderbolt.

Holy they are, and revered. *olbios* is he whom they,

being kind, decide to love among earth-bound mortals.

Straightaway they send to such a man, to reside at his hearth, in his great palace,

Ploutos [Wealth personified], who gives riches to mortal humans.

490 But come, you goddesses, who have charge of the *dēmos* of Eleusis, fragrant with incense.

and of Paros the island and rocky Antron.

Come, O Lady resplendent with gifts, queen *Dēō* [Demeter], bringer of *hōrai*,

both you and your daughter, the most beautiful Persephone.

Think kindly and grant, in return for this song, a rich means of livelihood that suits the *thūmos*.

495 And I will keep you in mind throughout the rest of my song.

## Notes

- [ [back](#) ] **1.** This name designates both the god of the underworld and the underworld itself.
- [ [back](#) ] **2.** As we shall now see, the narcissus is the trigger for the “trap door.”
- [ [back](#) ] **3.** On the division of the world, to be shared by the three brothers Zeus, Poseidon, and Hādēs, see *Iliad* 15.189-191.
- [ [back](#) ] **4.** That is, with the dead.
- [ [back](#) ] **5.** Different locales had different traditions about where Demeter was first recognized and where her cult and her Mysteries were first established.
- [ [back](#) ] **6.** Eleusis is the locale of the Eleusinian Mysteries; both Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries were eventually appropriated by the *polis* of Athens.
- [ [back](#) ] **7.** That is, the *polis* of Eleusis.
- [ [back](#) ] **8.** Evidently the oldest sister was speaking on behalf of the others as well.
- [ [back](#) ] **9.** The name suggests somebody who is a ‘giver of gifts’.
- [ [back](#) ] **10.** The textual transmission is garbled here, and my translation of this line is tentative (the key, I propose, is in the connections with lines 149-150).
- [ [back](#) ] **11.** The ‘gifts of the gods’ can be good fortune or bad fortune, making people rejoice or grieve. This theme is relevant to the *ad hoc* name of Demeter at [line 122](#).
- [ [back](#) ] **12.** All this is an exercise in religious hindsight. The temple of “today” is the palace of “yesterday,” the age of heroes. The priest of “today,” descended as he is from an influential aristocratic family, is the king of “yesterday.” At a complex cult-center or “temple” like that of Eleusis, which is run by an accretive hierarchy of hereditary priesthoods, the religious hindsight requires that the accretion of priestly offices in the temple be retrojected as an aggregation of kings in the “palace,” who are also the cult-heroes in the “temple.” Notice that, although Kallidikē promises Demeter a catalogue of the kings, what she says turns out to be a catalogue of queens, who are named in terms of their husbands. The husbands are in the foreground, but the wives in the background are the ones who manage the palace. The kings are all special cult-heroes connected with the worship of Demeter. Triptolemos, the primeval Plowman, is a local hero of Athens. Dioklos is a local hero of Megara (according to Megarean tradition, he was the Megarean ruler of Eleusis who was expelled by the Athenian hero Theseus: Plutarch *Theseus* 10; the Megarean character in Aristophanes *Acharnians* 774 swears by him as a cult-hero). We know less about Polyxenos, but here too we have evidence for his cult in symbiosis with the cult of Demeter; keeping

in mind the theme of god-hero antagonism, I note that *poluxenos* 'he who has many guests' is a conventional epithet of Hādēs. As for Eumolpos 'he who sings and dances well', he is the hero-ancestor of the ultimately dominant priestly family at the cult-center of Eleusis; he represents the most current tradition in Eleusis itself. Dolikhos was a cult-hero connected with the Eleusinian Games (Richardson commentary p. 199). Keleos seems to be a figure parallel to Eumolpos (cf. Richardson commentary p. 303).

[ [back](#) ] **13.** Note the roles of the father and the mother.

[ [back](#) ] **14.** Again, note the roles of the father and the mother.

[ [back](#) ] **15.** Note the diametrical oppositions between Demeter and the girls, both in movement and in appearance. In the cult of Demeter, such diametrically opposite movements and appearances are suitable for ritual re-enactment, in song and dance, by ensembles of specially-chosen girls and women.

[ [back](#) ] **16.** An epithet appropriate to kings, reflecting a myth-pattern that connects royal sovereignty with dew from the sky.

[ [back](#) ] **17.** We know from other sources that such a stool with a fleece on it was a "prop" for the purification ritual at Eleusis.

[ [back](#) ] **18.** Iambē, as we shall now see, is a personification of the iambic tradition, which reflects a ritual discourse that provokes laughter *and thereby promotes fertility*. This discourse, which makes fun of its targets, is often obscene in nature. The obscenity, it goes without saying, is *ritual* obscenity.

[ [back](#) ] **19.** The name of a ritual potion in the Eleusinian Mysteries.

[ [back](#) ] **20.** Another name for Demeter.

[ [back](#) ] **21.** The *hosia* is whatever can be considered specific to the sphere of humans, not gods, in a ritual. For example, *hosia* is when humans take a drink at a ritual, whereas the god involved does not. From the standpoint of myth, however, when the ritual is founded, the god has to show the way by doing it first, so that humans will have precedent. In such a case, the god does it "for the sake of *hosia*" (cf. Richardson commentary p. 225).

[ [back](#) ] **22.** With reference to the cutting of roots: this riddling euphemism designates extracts that serve as ingredients for magic potions.

[ [back](#) ] **23.** Literally, an 'anti-cutting'.

[ [back](#) ] **24.** Apparently the same threat as the Undercutter.

[ [back](#) ] **25.** Literally, 'he who shines for the *dēmos*'.

[ [back](#) ] **26.** Commentary in Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans*, pp. 181–182.

- [ [back](#) ] **27.** With downturned palms: a ritual gesture, described also in the *Iliad*.
- [ [back](#) ] **28.** In other versions, Demeter just leaves the baby in the fire, letting him perish right then and there (cf. Richardson commentary 244).
- [ [back](#) ] **29.** Styx (the word *stux* conveys the nervous reaction of recoiling at something that is chillingly ice-cold) is a river in Hādēs, and the gods swear by it when they guarantee the absolute truth of what they are saying.
- [ [back](#) ] **30.** Commentary in Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans*, p. 184.
- [ [back](#) ] **31.** In the present version of the Demeter myth, Metaneira’s mistake thus causes the boy’s eventual death. In other versions, as already mentioned, it causes the boy’s immediate death in the fire.
- [ [back](#) ] **32.** This refers to a ritual mock-battle at Eleusis, a quasi-athletic event known as the *Ballētus*, which was officially held on a seasonally-recurring basis to compensate for the death of the baby cult-hero Demophon. This mock-battle seems to have been the ritual kernel of a whole complex of events known as the Eleusinian Games (cf. Richardson commentary p. 246). Parallels: the Nemean and the Isthmian Games, pan-Hellenic athletic events, were held on a seasonally-recurring basis to compensate for the deaths of the baby cult-heroes Archemoros and Melikertes respectively.
- [ [back](#) ] **33.** Meaning: ‘the beautiful place of dancing’.
- [ [back](#) ] **34.** Gods are larger-than-life-size.
- [ [back](#) ] **35.** I see here a veiled reference to the ultimate development of the entire religious complex of Eleusis.
- [ [back](#) ] **36.** The meaning of this word is opaque; it probably conveys some mythological theme of anthropogony.
- [ [back](#) ] **37.** There were two ways of offering meat to the gods: as portions to be set aside and eaten (e.g. by the priests) or to be burned on the altar. The gods give vegetation to humans, who give their meat-offerings to the gods. If humans get no vegetation in order to sustain their life, the gods cannot get meat-offerings to sustain their *tīmē*.
- [ [back](#) ] **38.** Her golden wings are on her heels.
- [ [back](#) ] **39.** Hermes was the killer of a monster called Argos, who was himself a Hermetic figure. The form *argos* conveys swiftness and brightness, and the form *Argei-phontēs* may well convey both ‘Argos-killer’ and ‘he who kills with swiftness and brightness’.
- [ [back](#) ] **40.** The text of lines 349–350 is garbled, and the translation here is merely an approximation.

[ [back](#) ] **41.** Commentary on lines 351–354 in Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans*, pp. 186–187.

[ [back](#) ] **42.** This is conventionally said about a “knowing” smile: Hādēs knows more than he lets on.

[ [back](#) ] **43.** Hādēs is acting furtively (Richardson commentary p. 277).

[ [back](#) ] **44.** Maenads are frenzied devotees of Bacchus = Dionysus.

[ [back](#) ] **45.** These lines are incomplete: the gaps in the text are caused by a tear in the manuscript (the *Hymn to Demeter* is preserved in only one medieval manuscript). The reconstructed context: Persephone also runs to her mother. Demeter finds out that Persephone has eaten of the pomegranate that had been offered her by Hādēs. It is determined that Persephone must therefore stay in Hādēs for one-third of the year, even though she may spend the other two-thirds with her mother.

[ [back](#) ] **46.** Demeter is asking Persephone this question.

[ [back](#) ] **47.** As we know from external sources, both the crocus and the narcissus are sacred to Demeter and Persephone.

[ [back](#) ] **48.** It is a religious principle that Demeter and Persephone, on the occasion of their mother-daughter reunion, are “like-minded.”

[ [back](#) ] **49.** A cult-place associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries and with the myth about the first plowing. Demeter is here, at the time: see [lines 457–458](#).

[ [back](#) ] **50.** There is a lacuna in the first part of this line.

[ [back](#) ] **51.** Editors tend to skip the next line, which repeats the names of some, but not all, of the recipients of Demeter’s revelation of sacred mysteries.

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