
The Three Stages of Womanhood in the Hymn to Demeter

The Homeric hymn to Demeter shows the reader many stages of a woman's life, from a young carefree Kore, to a worried mother, to a woman past the age of motherhood who, although accorded respect, can only care for the young of others once her own child is gone. Not only Demeter and Persephone represent these stages, but also the women of the household of Keleos, which shows us that these stages not only adhere to the gods, but mortal women as well.

The hymn to Demeter starts by showing the earliest stage of a woman's life, demonstrated by Persephone, the "slender-ankled daughter [of Demeter]"¹ At this point in the hymn, Persephone has no cares, she is as yet a child, who carelessly plucked flowers with her companions. "[Persephone] was playing with the deep bosomed daughters of Okeanos picking flowers, roses, crocus, and beautiful violets throughout the soft meadow."² This girlhood is also shown through the fact that in much of the hymn, in fact all the way till line 55, and even often after that, Persephone is simply referred to as a, "Blushing maiden,"³ and, "slender-ankled child."⁴

After maidenhood we come to the stage of motherhood, full of the joys and woes of raising a child. This stage is very different from the carefree youthfulness of Persephone and the daughter of Okeanos, and is demonstrated by Demeter and by Metaneira, the wife of the mortal

¹ Homeric Hymns, Hymn 2, Hymn to Demeter, Line 2

² Lines 4-7

³ Line 8

⁴ Line 76

these citations can be inserted in the body of the text

man Keleos. These women are both full of the worries of motherhood, which when their child is threatened, can at a moment's notice turn to horror and despair. The chief aspect of the role of motherhood shown in the Hymn to Demeter is the protection and nurturing of children. When this is threatened, we see Demeter and Metaneira fall into a sort of mindless frenzy, with the only thought being for the safety of their children. When Demeter first discovers her daughter is missing she immediately springs into action, "And a sharp grief took hold of Demeter in her heart, and // with both hands // she tore the veil on her immortal hair, // and she cast the dark cloak down from both her shoulders, // and she rushed like a bird over the nourishing land and sea // searching..."⁵ And then, "For nine days, then, over the earth queenly Deos // roamed about holding blazing torches in her hands, // and she never tasted ambrosia or the sweet drink, nectar, // as she grieved, nor did she wash her skin with water."⁶ Again later on we see that when Demeter is still deprived of her child, "A more terrible and savage grief came into Demeter's heart."⁷ Another instance of this all-consuming concern for a child is by Metaneira, when she spies Demeter's seemingly harmful actions toward her son. "But she cried out and struck both thighs, // afraid for her child, and blindness covered her eyes."⁸ This shows that in the second stage of a woman's life shown in the hymn, the stage of motherhood, is blinded by the care for their child. Nothing else matters, not food, not drink, only the safety of the child.

A third stage of life shown in the Hymn to Demeter is the stage of women past childbearing age, when women no longer have children of their own. This is the stage shown when Demeter assumes the guise of an old mortal and joins the house of Keleos. She is described as looking, "Like a very old woman, one excluded from // childbearing and the gifts of garland

⁵ Lines 39-44

⁶ Lines 47-56

⁷ Line 90

⁸ Lines 245-245

loving Aphrodite, // as are the nurses of the children of lawgiving kings.”⁹ She is past her prime, past maidenhood, past motherhood; she is old and seasoned, respected and honored. This respect for the elder woman is shown by the daughters of Keleos; when they see Demeter in her mortal form they inquire who she is, and immediately offer her welcome. “There, in the shady halls, are women // the same age as you and younger ones, // who would welcome you in word and deed.”¹⁰ There is a certain respect shown between the younger woman and the elder. Metaneira quickly gives her the task of raising her son without anything more than the fact that the woman is older and wiser than herself. “Nurse this child for me whom the immortals bestowed on me // late born and beyond my hopes, though I wished for him // so often.”¹¹ This third stage is the stage of a nurse, a grandmother, nurturing and kind, older and wiser, but past child bearing herself.

In the Hymn to Demeter there are clearly three separate stages of a womanhood shown. The maiden, the mother, and the woman past motherhood. These stages are demonstrated by Demeter, Persephone, and Metaniera, wife of Keleos, ^{+ her daughters} In the Hymn to Demeter the stage of motherhood is the most focused on, and is represented as when a woman is in the prime of her life, not a naive maiden, nor a wizened grandmother, although all three stages are shown throughout the Hymn to Demeter.

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