

Women's Transitions in the *Hymn to Demeter*

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter can be interpreted in many different ways. It is often viewed as a mythological explanation for the presence of seasons. It can also be viewed, however, as an exploration of the "ideal" life of women for the ancient Greeks. It contains a narrative of the various stages in the life of various women. While some are divine and others are mortals, they share similar experiences - which suggests the hymn is attempting to show commonalities. The hymn explores maidenhood and motherhood. Since women in many ancient Greek cultures were secluded from men, a woman's relationship with other women was an important aspect of her life. The relationship between mother and daughter is emphasized, especially how it is affected by the transition of a daughter from maidenhood to motherhood.

Persephone and the daughters of Keleos and Metaneira are shown to be in their youth, in maidenhood. All of them are shown to have similar qualities and relationships. For one, while Persephone is playing and the daughters of Metaneira are collecting water, they are still only associating with other maidens. They seem to have limited duties within the household at this point, and ample time allowed for the play that even in modernity we associate with the innocence of childhood.

Beauty seems to be especially important in this stage. The maidens are only described with respect to their beauty. Persephone is "slender-ankled" (2) and "glorious in form" (66). We are told nothing of her abilities or other attributes until after she is wed (365-369). The same is true for the daughters.

This emphasis on beauty demonstrates the singular goal of maidenhood in the ancient mindset: marriage. For beauty serves little purpose other than to be beheld and admired. This end is made apparent when Demeter, as an older woman, pleads for the help of the daughter of Metaneira. Instead of wishing them health, prosperity, or long life, she wishes them "men for husbands and children to bear" (136). This is, perhaps, directed especially at Kallidike, the eldest daughter, who is further

described as an “unmarried maiden” (144). This emphasis seems to indicate that it is remarkable that she is unmarried, that is clearly time for her to be wed. For the hymn emphasizes that a maiden does not want to end up like the woman Demeter disguises herself as. When the daughters come upon the disguised Demeter, she is described as “excluded from the childbearing and the gifts of ... Aphrodite” (39). Clearly, the hymn is indicating that these are desirable ends. A husband is supposed to be a gift, and motherhood is something a woman shouldn’t want to be left out of.

Indeed, the text portrays motherhood or, at least the transition from maidenhood, as a fulfillment. Only after Persephone is with her husband is she considered “wise,” and, again, only after she is with Hades is she granted power (370, 365-369).

There seems to be a significant contradiction to this, however, and that is Demeter’s resistance to this marriage and the loss of her child. On closer inspection, there is a critical component to this: the unique situation of the marriage. Namely, few return from the underworld. Before this point, Hermes was the only god that is ever shown to emerge from the house of Hades. Thus, the descent of Persephone to the underworld is equivalent to her death. And, it is very fitting for a mother to mourn the death of her daughter.

For, the hymn appears to be stressing the importance of mother-daughter relationship. Demeter isn’t necessarily opposed to her daughter’s marriage. Indeed, she admits, as a mortal, that “parents wish [for]” a husband and child for a daughter (137). Rather, she struggles with the separation that marriage engenders. Once this separation is eliminated, she reconciles with Zeus and allows the earth to bear fruit again (467-472). Clearly, this separation is still difficult, as the ancients believed that every time Persephone departs again, the earth experiences winter. But, this temporary separation doesn’t induce a perpetual state of mourning.

It is tragic that one reason the mother-daughter relationship in ancient Greece is so potent is also the reason it is broken, causing pain. Human children are born with very little ingrained knowledge.

If the purpose of a woman in ancient Greece was marriage, then she must be taught about marriage. This task falls to the mother. Thus, it is a critical relationship for the future of the Greek child and for the state.

This is the reason the hymn so empathetically relates the emotions of Demeter. The hymn is also serving as a warning to fathers and suitors not to disregard the connection between a mother and daughter. Disaster results even for the mighty Zeus and Hades when they ignore it. Even though the hymn is still encouraging the obedience of women (for, in the end Demeter is still expected to not “disobey the commands of Zeus,”) it is encouraging the father not to so brutally execute his authority (448).