

Persephone As Parthenos

While the main narrative of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* is about Demeter, Hades' abduction of Persephone starts the action. Although most studies read this scene for evidence of the Eleusinian Mysteries, I will instead focus on the characterization of Persephone. In the opening, she is in a liminal stage between girl and woman. In contrast to scholarship that emphasizes her victimization (Foley 1994, Suter 2002), I will show that her liminality grants Persephone agency through the erotic nature of the meadow and its inhabitants.

Building on the foundation of scholars such as Deacy (2013), I argue that Persephone's role as victim is less important than her status as a *parthenos*, no longer a girl but not yet a wife and mother. As Calame (1997) and Sissa (1990) have demonstrated, a woman was called *parthenos* during this liminal phase of life. I show that the poet is most concerned with establishing Persephone as a *parthenos*, and the transitional phase is reflected even in the landscape of her abduction.

The meadow links the wild nature and the edge of maturity that maidens represent. The meadow's liminality signals that the transition from girl to woman is incomplete; young women were often compared to wild animals, and it was believed that she needed to be "tamed" through marriage and sex. The opening of the hymn explicitly shows Persephone as *parthenos*, using tropes and imagery from other representations of vulnerable young girls. Persephone plays with the Okeanids while away from her mother. Similarly, Nausikaa in *Odyssey* 6.100 and Aphrodite in the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite* (120) also play, *παίζω*, with their female companions when they are interrupted by male figures. Girls picking flowers or dancing in meadows often was a

way to hint that they were ready for marriage, one of very few ways a woman could express agency in her maturation.

Persephone reveals her agency when she relates her story to Demeter. The vocabulary used emphasizes the erotic nature of the meadow from Persephone's perspective. Rather than argue that Persephone facilitates her own abduction (Foley 1994), I demonstrate that there is a tension between consent and coercion emerging from the status of those in the meadow. Women, especially young, marriageable girls, were perceived, from the male point of view, as both agent and object, the viewed and the viewing.

I propose that Persephone in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* is in fact a goddess of liminality par excellence. At first, she is neither girl nor woman. Then, while she does marry Hades, according to most traditions, she never becomes a mother: she never fully crosses into the category of *gynē*, but she is no longer a *parthenos* either. The pomegranate seed keeps her from being a permanent resident of Olympos or the Underworld; she is neither fully Kore nor Persephone. Thus, I demonstrate that the opening scene of the hymn in particular shows us the role of Persephone: that of a goddess who was neither fully here nor there, but in-between.

Bibliography

- Calame, Claude. 1997. *Choruses of Young Women in Ancient Greece*. Translated by D. Collins and J. Orion. Lanham, MD.
- Deacy, Susan. 2013. "From 'Flowery Tales' to 'Heroic Rapes': Virginal Subjectivity in the Mythological Meadow." *Arethusa* 46.3: 395-413.
- Foley, Helene, ed. 1994. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter. Translation, Commentary, and Interpretative Essays*. Princeton.

Larson, Jennifer. 2001. *Greek Nymphs*. Oxford.

Richardson, Nicholas J., ed. 1974. *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Oxford.

Sissa, Giulia. 1990. *Greek Virginit*y. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Harvard.

Suter, Ann. 2002. *The Narcissus and the Pomegranate: An Archaeology of the Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Ann Arbor, MI.