

Tracking Archetypes: The Use of the Feminine and Masculine in Modern Interpretations of the  
*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* showcases the power of a goddess both in the realm of mortals and in the power structures of Olympus. It is a tale of a mother's love for her daughter as well as that daughter's new role in society as she comes of age. Additionally, its ties to the rites at Eleusis, which were some of the most widespread mystery rites in the ancient world, reveals the hymn's importance to humans understanding their own mortality. Specifically, Demeter's potential power to help the initiates achieve fulfilling harvests and escape the more horrifying aspects of the underworld is awe-inspiring, and much of the hymn focuses on her story, both as a mother mourning her daughter and as a potential insurgent to the balanced world order set by Olympus.

Yet, in modern interpretations of the myth, it is not the story of the mother that takes precedence. Instead, many modern interpretations focus on the second story found in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*—Persephone and her romance with Hades. As a result, Demeter's role in many of these interpretations is diminished. In *Lore Olympus*, her love for her daughter is even turned into a toxic foil that Persephone and Hades must overcome to achieve happiness. What has caused this shift in interpretations of the myth's characters? Why has the modern eye emphasized the masculine and feminine dynamic of the husband-wife relationship at the expense of the matriarchal dynamic of the mother-daughter relationship?

Traditionally, the *Homeric Hymns* have been regarded as potentially functioning as *prooimions* to longer works or serving some kind of cult or performance purpose. Additionally, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* “appears to offer significant clues to the best kept secret of antiquity: the sacred Mysteries of the Two Goddesses at Eleusis” (Clay, 1989), and these

connections to the rites potentially impact certain choices the original poet made in the representations of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades. However, this does not negate any of the hymn's literary effects or value to readers and listeners. As Foley states in her introduction to the Hymn, "classical literature practically begs us to ask questions about gender" (Foley, 1994). The dynamic of the hymn's characters in relation to one another is perhaps indicative, to some degree, of gender roles and dynamics in the culture in which the work was produced. Scholars such as Carlson and Doherty view gender dynamics at work in the Hymn, and they seek to explore the implications of its interpretation by utilizing different lenses for how one views the power dynamics between genders in the poem.

Through examining several modern interpretations, such as Rachel Smythe's *Lore Olympus*, Aimee Carter's *The Goddess Test*, and Rita Dove's collection *Mother Love*, I am tracking changes in the characters' development and interactions inside the myth. Through comparing these characterization developments with those found in ancient renditions of the myth, I can investigate what adaptations and interpretations reveal about human cultural interactions with the myth's story. To do this, I am utilizing theoretical approaches including Carl Jung's view of archetypes and studies of gender theory to chart and understand the shifting power dynamics of masculine and feminine archetypes. By looking at literary comparisons in the framework of these methodologies, I am exploring what cultural associations we can derive from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, its purpose, and its compositional elements in different eras of time and cultures. In a slightly broader sense, I am interested in seeing *how* the mythological framework can be adapted to reflect a different culture, but my focus for the sake of this paper will center on the characterization of Persephone and Demeter, their relationship to others in the

adaptations, and what, if any, conclusions can be drawn about the changes in their representations.

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