

Goethe's Homeric Hymn to Dorothea
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Goethe thought of *Hermann und Dorothea* as his only successful epic, and critics have repeatedly classified it as a bourgeois epic (*ein bürgerliches Epos*). Yet the poem, while written in hexameters and divided into cantos, is at most an epyllion rather than an epic, and perhaps even more of an idyll than an epyllion.

That said, Goethe's hero and heroine are both of genuinely heroic stature, and they lend the poem a satisfying weight and solidity no other German middle-class idyll of the period can boast. Hermann, at least in the opening cantos of the poem, falls far short of the Homeric, for he is young, indecisive, and cripplingly shy. Yet his great strength and size signal his potential as a hero, as does his name, which is a clear reference to Arminius, the chief of Cherusci, the famous conqueror of Varus and his legions. Arminius, victor of the Battle of the *Teutoburger Wald*, as Herbert Benario has shown, had even by Goethe's day evolved into a quasi-mythical *typus* of German folk-hero. Goethe would have known his story well. Ultimately, Hermann will emerge as a grown man who clearly has the valor to live up to his glorious name, but he cannot grow up until he has been transformed by wooing and winning a goddess.

Dorothea is far more Homeric than Hermann is. Throughout the poem, she appears as an allomorph of Demeter. Her story parallels the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* in more respects than one: when Hermann first meets Dorothea, she is a wanderer, full of grief over the loss of a loved one. Like Demeter, she meets with hospitable strangers by a well and they offer her a new home. Like Demeter, she assumes the role of a servant, and assuages her private sorrow by caring for someone else's child. Like Demeter, she is a source of physical and spiritual strength and nourishment to all around her.

The parallels do not stop here. Homeric characterization is frequently connected with physical appearance, and Dorothea is no exception to this tendency. She resembles strikingly the goddess whose role she plays. When Demeter enters the palace of Keleos and Metaneira, her head reaches the roof (*HH Dem.* 188-9). Dorothea is also unusually tall: when she and Hermann first enter the house of Hermann's parents, the door seems almost too small to admit them (9.56-60)! As Demeter walks, her dark mantle flutters around her slender feet (*HH Dem.* 183). Goethe picked up on this detail, and endowed Dorothea with a pleated blue skirt that swirls around her trim ankles ("wohlgebildeten Knöchel.") The poet recognized this image as significant enough to include it twice without alteration, perhaps in imitation of repeated passages in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (5.175-6; 6:143-4). $\nu\delta\omicron\omicron\epsilon\iota\chi\upsilon\rho\zeta$, too, is a common Homeric epithet for Demeter. Finally, in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, when the goddess finally appears in her true form, a heavenly fragrance wafts from her garments (*HH Dem.* 277-8). Similarly, when Dorothea stumbles while walking through the field to the home of Hermann's parents (where her true identity will soon be revealed), the hero catches her in his arms, and rapturously breathes the "*Balsam des Atems*," the fragrance of her breath (8.97).

When Demeter nurtures the infant Demophoon, he thrives and grows so quickly that the household marvels at him. Hermann's maturation also startles his family: his father remarks that true love has made a man out of a boy in a single day (5.76). Once transformed from son into bridegroom, Herman is ready to fight for a future of peace and plenty in the bounteously fertile land where he and his Dorothea can be happy. Dorothea has changed him from a boy into a hero.