

Cutting Remarks: The Undercutter Passage and Mortality in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.

In this paper I propose that the obscure Undercutter Passage (lines 227-30) refers to the subsequent Immortalization Passage (235-241). In the first, Demeter addresses Metaneira and accepts the job of nursing her baby Demophoön, stating that she does not expect that the "Undercutter" - *ὑποταμνόν* (*hapax* or corrupt) - will harm him for she knows an "antidote" (*ἀντίτομον*) stronger "than the woodcutter" (*ὑλοτόμοιο*). As nurse, she then receives Demophoön and over a period of time treats him with ambrosia, breathes on him, and inserts him directly into fire to immortalize him, a process which is curtailed by Metaneira's ignorant intervention.

Scholarly debate has revolved around the contextual significance and meaning of the three terms often rendered as "undercutter", "woodcutter", and "antidote". In this paper, I adopt a different approach and focus on that which is potentially "undercut", Demophoön. After setting out the evidence for intratextual allusion (Undercutter Passage to Immortalization Passage), my paper proposes that the significance of the terms *ὑποταμνόν* (228) and *ὑλοτόμοιο* (229) lies in the widespread Homeric allegory in which human life flourishes like vegetation (e.g. *hAphr.* 104, *hAphr.* 189, *hAphr.* 278; *hDem.* 241; *Il.* 6.146-9, and *Il.* 21.462-6); the Undercutter represents that which cuts short human life and alludes to Metaneira. At a narratological level the poet metapoetically plays with his audience by allowing Demeter to chide us, his audience, along with Metaneira for our lack of understanding of the Undercutter passage.

The two passages share common elements in their "incantatory quality" (Richardson 1974; 61, 229, and 239), and their implication of Demeter as protector of the vulnerable Demophoön. However, the meaning and significance of lines 225-30 of the *Hymn* have been unclear, their obscurity exacerbated by the paucity of surviving manuscripts (the single M manuscript) and lack of scholia, as well as the *hapax* or corruption *ὑποταμνόν* at 228 often

translated as "the Undercutter" (e.g. Foley 1999, 14). Four main explanations of the passage have been advanced: Allen, Halliday, and Sykes (1936, 155-6) after Allen (1895, 13) suggested that *ύλοτόμος/ον* refers to a toothworm, which in Greek thought could bore into the tooth, producing pain. Richardson (1974, 230) suggested that three obscure terms all refer to the cutting of herbs: In this view, *ύλοτόμος* (229) and *ύποτάμων, ύποτάμνον, or ύποταμνόν* (228) (as the received *ύποταμνόν* has been read) refer to an herb-cutter along the lines of the *ρίζοτόμος* who gathers roots for healing or witchcraft and who could harm baby Demophoön - the *άντίτομον* is then an herbal antidote. Faraone (2001) has noted the preponderance of demon names ending in *-τομος* and proposed that the Undercutter and Woodcutter refer to a demon, to whom bodily pains are attributable by cutting into the suffering victim.

Leclerc (2006) proposed that the Undercutter passage refers to the immortalization attempt (as do I), but that the cutting terms refer to humanity's Hesiodic post-Golden-Age way of life, in which earth and sea are cut, brush and woodland (*ύλλη*) are cleared for farming, and wood is cut for the funeral pyre. I however suggest that the element *ύλο-* refers to human life, which would support Ignarra's 1781 emendation of *ύποταμνόν* (228, M) to *ύποτάμων* used as a *nomen agentis* (metaphorically corresponding to the literal *ταμνόν ύπο* used at *Od.* 23.204 for cutting part of an olive trunk), and taking *ύλοτόμοιο* (229) as a genitive of comparison of the attested *ύλοτόμος* (e.g. at *Il.* 23.123) as woodcutter. The Undercutter and the Woodcutter are equivalent and refer to someone or something which can cut short or cut off (*ύποτέμνω*) human life and allude to Metaneira. Meanwhile, the antidote, *άντίτομος*, (now a pun) at line 229 (used by Pindar to refer to Medea's herbs protecting Jason from the fire-breathing bulls in *Pythian 4*, 221) foreshadows Demeter's magical protective measure against mortality.

Ironically, Metaneira's failure to understand Demeter's obscure proleptic speech of 227-30 concerning the Undercutter is responsible for Demophoön's continued mortality. At lines 256-61, Demeter berates humanity in general and Metaneira in particular as unseeing and witless to foreknow (*προγνώμεναι*, *hDem.* 257) an oncoming good (the immortalization of Demophoön and the following passage *qua* poetry). It is not through the follies of a nurse that Demophoön has his time cut short, but through the follies of his own mother.