

Demeter and her Youth at the Crossroads of Ptolemaic Politics and Religion

The myth of Demeter and Erysichthon in Callimachus' *Hymn to Demeter* takes the traditional form of a warning against religious transgression. A close reading of Callimachus' presentation of the Erysichthon story, however, reveals that it doubles as an instrument of royal propaganda. The blasphemous, immature Erysichthon is not only a foil for the pious Ptolemies but embodies in mythic form the fate of Egypt's enemies.

A striking aspect of Callimachus' Erysichthon is his age (Ambühl 2005). At the beginning of the hymn, Erysichthon is a young man, but post-punishment, he becomes a baby (βρέφος, 6.100). Comparisons of the hymn to the *Homeric Hymn* are fruitful. Ambühl has looked to the young Demophon/Triptolemus as a foil for Erysichthon, but Persephone herself also serves as his foil. While Persephone matures in the *Homeric Hymn*, Erysichthon returns to babyhood. For example, while Persephone fasts in the underworld, until she eats a pomegranate seed, Erysichthon gorges on food. The pomegranate symbolizes Persephone's permanent entrance into adulthood (Foley 1994), since she then marries Hades, while the food that Erysichthon consumes symbolizes his state as a permanent child who will never marry and sire children. This emphasis on Erysichthon's unnatural childishness explains the odd absence of Mestra, who is prominent in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* (fr.43) and later rewritten in by Ovid in his version of the Erysichthon story (*Met.* 8.547-884).

By exploiting the themes essential to the *Homeric Hymn*—namely the Demeter-child relationship, youth, and fertility—Callimachus reinforces and bolsters Ptolemaic political-religious ideologies. The early Ptolemies quickly adopted and assimilated Egyptian religion into their own in order to fortify and solidify their power. A goddess fused with the Egyptian goddess Isis at an early point in Egyptian religion and a popular focus in Greek poetry, Demeter proved a

perfect agent for Ptolemaic propaganda. The ruling party adopted the Egyptian tradition of divine ruler and promoted this image throughout the country on coins and temples (Clayman 2014).

Callimachus, well aware of the image of divine pharaoh (Stephens 2003), supported his patrons in his poetry, particularly his hymns. For instance, in the *Hymn to Zeus*, Ptolemy II Philadelphus figures as a *young Zeus*, who, like Philadelphus himself, despite his age, overpowers his older siblings and becomes the king whose reign brings wealth and prosperity to all (Barbantani 2011). Such motifs occur also in the *Hymn to Demeter*, where we are presented with Erysichthon, a foil for the just Ptolemaic ruler who worshipped Demeter and promoted her cults in ritual processions and temples.

The Demeter hymn can be further linked religiously and politically with the Ptolemies who identified themselves with the goddess herself. The Ptolemaic queens, whom Depew has already linked to Demeter (2004), characterized themselves as Demeter on the basis that they were very fertile, bore many children, and provided bundles of wheat during famines (Clayman 2014). The Ptolemaic kings were also closely associated with Demeter/Isis since they acquired titles such as “Horus,” the child of Isis.

If the Ptolemies are closely linked to Demeter, then could an enemy be linked to Erysichthon? Magas, king of Cyrene, is an attractive choice. After attacking Egypt while Philadelphus II was in power, Magas was reported to have died after a fatal episode of gluttony (Ath. *Deipn.*12.550b-c). In addition, his only daughter Berenice was married to Philadelphus’ son and thenceforth referred to as the daughter of Philadelphus, not Magas (Parsons 1977). Callimachus’ elimination of Mestra in his hymn might reflect these historical events, since he would have wanted to disconnect the future Ptolemaic queen Berenice from her tainted father.

Although we cannot be certain of an historical counterpart for Erysichthon, Demeter in all her capacities represents the fertility, generosity and stability maintained by the Ptolemies, while the Demeter-honoring child, who acts in moderation, reflects the religious child imagery adopted by the Ptolemies. Greedy Erysichthon, on the other hand, represents a Demeter/Ptolemaic-opposing child, such as Magas, who remains infertile.

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