

A Yoke on the Neck: Mythic Echoes in the Story of Demophoon

While a powerful story on its own, the *Hymn to Demeter* contains within it another mini-story, namely the account of Demeter and Demophoon (lines 91-300). When these two stories are carefully examined, it becomes clear that they are not placed side-by-side in a haphazard way; rather, the one recapitulates the other by containing the same plot points and mythic echoes in roughly the same order (Rubin and Deal 1980). In this presentation, I will discuss the outlines of these two stories before going on to discuss the ramifications of their similarities both within the *Hymn to Demeter* and certain other works of ancient Greek literature.

The primary storyline of the *Hymn to Demeter* is a well-known episode in Greek mythology. Seeing his niece Persephone, Hades obtained her father Zeus' permission to take her as his wife and proceeded to abduct her. Left out of the plans, her mother Demeter assumed the worst and proceeded to hunt for her. When she discovered what had happened, she held humanity hostage by creating eternal winter until she received her daughter back. Ultimately, a compromise was worked out whereby Persephone would spend part of the year with her new husband Hades and part of the year with her mother Demeter.

According to the *Hymn*, a distraught Demeter wandered to Eleusis, where she took the form of an old woman and was taken in by the household of Celeus and Metaneira. After having a number of daughters, Metaneira finally gave birth to a son, Demophoon, who being the heir was highly cherished by her parents. Demeter was given the task of raising the baby boy safely to adulthood. Unbeknownst to his mother, Demeter had greater things in mind; she intended to make Demophoon immortal. In order to accomplish this, she "hid" him in the fire every night. This seemingly destructive therapy would have led to great benefits for the baby boy if his

mother Metaneira, spying one night, had not quickly snatched him from the fire. After this happened, Demeter revealed her true form and scolded Metaneira for ruining her son's chance at immortality.

The plot of the two stories follows essentially the same syntagm. In each story, a god unexpectedly comes onto the scene and subjects a much-beloved child to some kind of burial—either in the earth or in fire. While a typical observer would assume malevolence on the part of the god, in neither case is this true. When the child's mother finds out, she becomes extremely distraught and interrupts the god's attempt at "hiding" the child. Nonetheless, the child remains indelibly affected by its unusual experience—Persephone remains the husband of Zeus and Demophoon retains a memory of Demeter (at the very least). As it turns out, in each case, the well-meaning mother prevented her child from attaining a greater good—whether that be full-time queenship of the underworld or immortality.

Given the close connections between the story of Persephone and the cycle of the seasons related to agriculture, I suggest that the tales of Persephone and Demophoon are telling parallel stories which hint at the tragic (mythical) loss of a golden age in which humans originally had no need to work for their food and could even have attained to immortality. An understanding of these plotlines is enriched by a reference to Hesiod *Works and Days* 42-52, which contains a similar syntagm relating to a primordial lost golden age undone by a well-meaning "hiding" by a god and the consequences brought on by another. While the actors in this case are Prometheus and Zeus respectively, the plot line and its mythic echoes cohere with those in the *Hymn to Demeter*, suggesting a broader story running through these archaic works of Greek literature.

Bibliography

Rubin, Nancy Felson and Harriet M. Deal. "Some Functions of the Demophon Episode in the Hymn to Demeter." *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica, New Series* 5 (1980): 7-21.