

## Out to Play Before We Give Her Away: A Maiden Chorus in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* opens with a depiction of Persephone surrounded by a company of other young girls (παίζουσαν κούρησι σὺν Ὠκεανοῦ βαθυκόλποις, 5). Alongside her female age-mates, the daughters of Ocean, Persephone is a member of a collective, seemingly safe from the dangers that await a young woman alone. Within the physically innocent space of the meadow (Arthur 1977), she feels removed from danger and free to occupy a space that is neither a paternal nor a marital home. The feeling of safety provided by her companions, however, is simply a distraction from this chorus-like group's other purpose: to display her physical and sexual maturity and help initiate her into the world of adulthood and marriage. I argue that this group acts as a sort of prototypical maiden chorus to indicate Persephone's marital readiness and initiate her transition to adulthood. Particularly through the use of παίζω as an indicator of both the group's choral aspects and its members' sexual availability, the group of Oceanids provides the social context against which to read Persephone's evolution from παρθένος to γυνή.

Calame 1997 describes the identification of non-lyric choruses, noting especially the description of Nausicaa and her companions at *Odyssey* 6.99-109, and Rosenmeyer 1994 has observed how the use of the verb παίζω conveys the sexual status of this group; however, little attention has been given to the role of the Oceanids at the opening of the *Hymn to Demeter*, which combines a chorus-like group with the activity suggested by παίζω. I explore the occurrence of this word early in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* as indicative of not only chorus-like activity on the part of Persephone and the daughters of Ocean, but also Persephone's sexual liminality and marriageability.

Although little detail is provided about the individual members or their activity, it is possible to identify certain choral markers in the Oceanids. The daughters of Ocean seem to be Persephone's age-mates, suggested by their designation as "κούρησι" and her own identification as "κούρη" in line 8; this is the primary signifier for both parties, emphasizing their girlhood at this early stage in the poem. Additionally, their participation in *παίζουσιν* suggests an important resemblance to other groups of young women, particularly that of Nausicaa and her companions. Calame argues that the use of this verb can be generally indicative of choral activity of young girls, and its appearance in the *Odyssey* (6.106) helps allow for the choral identification of Nausicaa and her age-mates. As Rosenmeyer notes, this verb appears in a number of other erotically charged spaces, including Anacreon's Thracian filly poem (*PMG* 417.10) and the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (120), suggesting the occupation of a sexually liminal stage by the young women whose activity *παίζειν* describes. I extend Calame's reading of Nausicaa and her companions as a chorus-like group to observe similar choral aspects in the Oceanid/Persephone group, while applying the erotic elements of *παίζω* in order to suggest a stronger social function for this group that appears just before Persephone's transition to adulthood begins.

The choral characteristics of this group and their role in the poem are suggestive of the role of archaic female choruses in an initiatory context (Calame 1997) and in the ability to display social and sexual maturity to the community (Stehle 1997); they may even be reflective of the specific chorus within the marriage ritual itself that accompanied the young bride during her physical transition between households. By identifying the daughters of Ocean as a group with specifically choral tendencies, the opening of the *Hymn* sets the stage for the transition of its most singular member out of the collective and into her ultimate role as a wife.

## Bibliography

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