

## Speech, Power, and Praise in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*

In this paper, I analyze the pivotal role that speech plays in developing and asserting authority in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* and how this reveals Demeter, rather than Zeus, as the most powerful deity in the hymn, as befits a composition intended to praise her.

The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* is noteworthy for the mythic narrative that makes up the majority of the poem's content. Unlike several of the other Homeric *Hymns*, the narrative segment of the *Hymn to Demeter* begins quickly and the hymn moves rapidly, both because the hymnic genre lends itself to compression and because such compression heightens the dramatic tone of the narrative (Richardson 2015). This swift movement from the opening address to the narrative segment of the *Hymn to Demeter* is in contrast with more developed introductions in, for example, the *Hymn to Apollo* and the *Hymn to Aphrodite*. This is not to suggest, however, that the *Hymn to Demeter* is lacking in praise for the goddess. Rather, I argue that the lengthy narrative sequence continually offers praise of the goddess by demonstrating her power over both divine and mortal affairs.

Not only does the content of the myth, in which Demeter exerts influence over the life and well-being of mortals, resonate with the request that the speaker makes of her – to obtain a comfortable life – but the myth also demonstrates Demeter's ability to speak and act authoritatively. The hymn constructs the figures of Demeter and Zeus as rivals struggling for authority over Persephone and this struggle is reflected in part through the speech acts performed by these divinities and their allies. Demeter and her allies are successful speakers and obtain the goals of their speech acts, whereas Zeus and his allies either fail to speak efficaciously or are only able to do so once Demeter has relented in her anger.

As the mythic narrative develops, the role and power of speech emerges as an important theme: Persephone vocalizes her protest to her abduction (lines 19-41); Helios and Demeter exchange requests (lines 64-87); Zeus sends embassies to persuade Demeter (lines 321-330); Hermes convinces Hades to release Persephone (lines 347-358); and Rhea tells Demeter to rejoin the Olympians (lines 460-469). As this partial summary suggests, each episode of the *Hymn* can be defined by a speech act that not only drives the plot but also demonstrates the authority of Demeter. Rather than focus on topics such as direct and indirect speech or rhetoric (Beck 2001 and Faulkner 2015), I focus on the success or failure of the speech acts each speaker performs. I argue that Demeter and her allies speak effectively and obtain the objectives of their speech acts whereas Zeus and his emissaries are unable to do so until Demeter actively relents in her anger.

In the first part of the paper, I discuss Persephone's scream and cries for help as she is carried off by Hades. Although it is her abduction and subsequent absence that defines much of the poem's narrative, this initial presentation of Persephone's speech, and the ways in which her parents react to it, lays an important foundation for the interactions between Zeus and Demeter that follow. In part two, I analyze the exchange between Demeter and Helios, in which Demeter speaks effectively and, therefore, obtains the information she is seeking. Helios, however, does not speak effectively in this exchange. Helios' failed attempt to ease Demeter's grief establishes a precedent for other speakers who speak on behalf of Zeus and almost all of whom fail. These additional failed speech acts are considered in part three of the paper. Although Zeus authorizes a series of messengers to speak on his behalf to Demeter, none of these speakers are successful. Only when Demeter's demands for the restoration of Persephone are met, can the speakers authorized by Zeus perform their speech acts successfully. In the conclusion, I discuss

how this presentation of Demeter as a successful speaker serves the goals of the speaker of the hymn, who intends both to praise the goddess and receive her favor.

#### Bibliography

Beck, D. 2001. "Direct and Indirect Speech in the Homeric 'Hymn to Demeter.'" *TAPA* 131: 51-74.

Faulkner, A., 2015. "The Silence of Zeus: Speech in the Homeric Hymns." In Faulkner and Hodkinson 2015: 31-45.

Richardson, N. 2015. "Constructing a Hymnic Narrative: Tradition and Innovation in the Longer Homeric Hymns." In Faulkner and Hodkinson 2015: 19-30.