

Gendered Travel in the *Hymn to Demeter*

One of the central issues in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* is freedom of movement. The inextricable twin natures of Hades' chariot as method of transportation and method of kidnapping (de Jong 2012) draws attention to the movements of the other gods of the hymn. While the male deities are able to travel from Olympus to Earth to Hades by means of chariots or winged sandals, the goddesses (with the exception of Iris) must travel by foot. Although Demeter cannot access male-coded methods of transportation, she does a remarkable amount of traveling that is facilitated in some instances by her assumed old-woman form (Pratt 2000). Over the course of the *Hymn to Demeter*, Demeter's movement away from Olympus represents her subversion of Zeus' control.

Demeter's grief in her sudden loss of motherhood grants her a freedom of movement diametrically opposed to Persephone's stagnant state. In fact, Demeter's first reaction after Persephone's theft is to wander (*HHDem*, 47-50). Later, this wandering and absence from Olympus becomes directly connected to Demeter's threat against Zeus and the rest of the gods: "for she said that she would not ever return to fragrant Olympus/ Nor would she send fruit from the earth, /Until she saw her pretty-faced daughter with her eyes" (*HHDem*, 331-3). While Demeter grows further and further from Olympus and Zeus' control, once Persephone has been kidnapped by Hades she remains stuck in seated and standing positions, passive both in terms of the action of the story as well as grammatically (*HHDem*, 342-5).

Demeter's excessive travel, resultant distance from Olympus, and coinciding famine are all inherently destructive to Zeus' rule, an argument that supports and expands Clay's reading of the *Hymn to Demeter* as a political struggle resolved by Demeter and Persephone accepting new

powers under Zeus' authority (Clay 2006). Freedom of movement is not among Demeter's new powers, as it is established in the final lines of the hymn that she must send the male god Ploutus, to act as an intermediary with mortals (*HHDem*, 488). If Demeter became more and more powerful and dangerous as she got further from Olympus, this represents her final loss of power and her return to the status that she held before the events of the poem. As soon as Demeter has done what Zeus asked, she quickly loses agency over the action in the lines that follow. The verbs suddenly become third person plural as the goddesses Rhea, Demeter, and Persephone seem to move in concert with one another: βάν, ναιετάουσι, φίλωνται (*HHDem*, 483-7). This is a sharp change from the third person singular verbs of motion that Demeter previously dominated across the hymn (ex. *HHDem*, 90-95). No longer does Demeter act on her own to threaten or endanger mortals. Now she exists as a part of a unit of other unnamed goddesses on Olympus and sends wealth to men. Demeter's confinement to Olympus draws the hymn back to where it began, with male figures being able to travel freely and affect the lives of others, and female figures without the means of independent travel. These elements of the hymn reinforce the idea that independent divine female travel is a subversive act.

Works Cited

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