

HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER
TRANSLATED BY GREGORY NAGY

- 1 I begin to sing of Demeter, the holy goddess with the beautiful hair.
And her daughter [Persephone] too. The one with the delicate ankles, whom
Hadês[1]
seized. She was given away by Zeus, the loud-thunderer, the one who sees
far and wide.
Demeter did not take part in this, she of the golden double-axe, she who
glories in the harvest.
- 5 She [Persephone] was having a good time, along with the daughters of
Okeanos, who wear their girdles slung low.
She was picking flowers: roses, crocus, and beautiful violets.
Up and down the soft meadow. Iris blossoms too she picked, and hyacinth.
And the narcissus, which was grown as a lure for the flower-faced girl
by Gaia [Earth]. All according to the plans of Zeus. She [Gaia] was doing a
favor for the one who receives many guests [Hadês].
- 10 It [the narcissus] was a wondrous thing in its splendor. To look at it gives a
sense of holy awe
to the immortal gods as well as mortal humans.
It has a hundred heads growing from the root up.
Its sweet fragrance spread over the wide skies up above.
And the earth below smiled back in all its radiance. So too the churning mass
of the salty sea.
- 15 She [Persephone] was filled with a sense of wonder, and she reached out
with both hands
to take hold of the pretty plaything.[2] And the earth, full of roads leading
every which way, opened up under her.
It happened on the Plain of Nysa. There it was that the Lord who receives
many guests made his lunge.
He was riding on a chariot drawn by immortal horses. The son of Kronos.
The one known by many names.
He seized her against her will, put her on his golden chariot,
- 20 And drove away as she wept. She cried with a piercing voice,

calling upon her father [Zeus], the son of Kronos, the highest and the best.

But not one of the immortal ones, or of human mortals, heard her voice. Not even the olive trees which bear their splendid harvest. Except for the daughter of Persaios, the one who keeps in mind the vigor of nature.

25 She heard it from her cave. She is Hekatê, with the splendid headband. And the Lord Helios [Sun] heard it too, the magnificent son of Hyperion. They heard the daughter calling upon her father, the son of Kronos. But he, all by himself, was seated far apart from the gods, inside a temple, the precinct of many prayers.

He was receiving beautiful sacrificial rites from mortal humans.

30 She was being taken, against her will, at the behest of Zeus, by her father's brother, the one who makes many *sêmata*, the one who receives many guests, the son of Kronos, the one with many names. On the chariot drawn by immortal horses.

So long as the earth and the star-filled sky were still within the goddess's [Persephone's] view, as also the fish-swarming sea [*pontos*], with its strong currents,

35 as also the rays of the sun, she still had hope that she would yet see her dear mother and that special group, the immortal gods.

For that long a time her great *noos* was soothed by hope, distressed as she was.

The peaks of mountains resounded, as did the depths of the sea [*pontos*], with her immortal voice. And the Lady Mother [Demeter] heard her.

40 And a sharp *akhos* seized her heart. The headband on her hair she tore off with her own immortal hands and threw a dark cloak over her shoulders.

She sped off like a bird, soaring over land and sea, looking and looking. But no one was willing to tell her the truth [*etêtuma*],

45 not one of the gods, not one of the mortal humans, not one of the birds, messengers of the truth [*etêtuma*].

Thereafter, for nine days did the Lady Demeter wander all over the earth, holding torches ablaze in her hands.

Not once did she take of ambrosia and nectar, sweet to drink,
50 in her grief, nor did she bathe her skin in water.
But when the tenth bright dawn came upon her,
Hekatê came to her, holding a light ablaze in her hands.
She came with a message, and she spoke up, saying to her:
“Lady Demeter, bringer of *hōrai*, giver of splendid gifts,
55 which one of the gods who dwell in the sky or which one of mortal humans
seized Persephone and brought grief to your *philos thûmos*?
I heard the sounds, but I did not see with my eyes
who it was. So I quickly came to tell you everything, without error.”
So spoke Hekatê. But she was not answered
60 by the daughter [Demeter] of Rhea with the beautiful hair. Instead, she
[Demeter] joined her [Hekatê] and quickly
set out with her, holding torches ablaze in her hands.
They came to Hêlios, the seeing-eye of gods and men.
They stood in front of his chariot-team, and the resplendent goddess asked
this question:
“Helios! Show me respect [*aidôs*], god to goddess, if ever
65 I have pleased your heart and *thûmos* in word or deed.
It is about the girl born to me, a sweet young seedling, renowned for her
beauty,
whose piercing cry I heard resounding through the boundless aether,
as if she were being forced, though I did not see it with my eyes.
I turn to you as one who ranges over all the earth and sea [*pontos*]
70 as you look down from the bright aether with your sunbeams:
tell me without error whether you have by any chance seen my *philon* child,
and who has taken her away from me by force, against her will,
and then gone away? Tell me which one of the gods or mortal humans did
it.”
So she spoke. And the son of Hyperion answered her with these words:
75 “Daughter of Rhea with the beautiful hair, Queen Demeter!
You shall know the answer, for I greatly respect you and feel sorry for you
as you grieve over your child, the one with the delicate ankles. No one else
among all the immortals is responsible [*aitios*] except the cloud-gatherer
Zeus himself,
who gave her to Hadês as his beautiful wife.

So he gave her to his own brother. And he [Hadês], heading for the misty
 realms of darkness,
 80 seized her as he drove his chariot and as she screamed out loud.
 But I urge you, goddess: stop your loud cry of lamentation: you should not
 have an anger without bounds, all in vain. It is not unseemly
 to have, of all the immortals, such a son-in-law as Hadês, the one who makes
 many *sêmata*.
 85 He is the brother [of Zeus], whose seed is from the same place. And as for
tîmê,
 he has his share, going back to the very beginning, when the three-way
 division of inheritance was made.^[3]
 He dwells with those whose king he was destined by lot to be.”^[4]
 So saying, he shouted to his horses, and they responded to his command
 as they swiftly drew the speeding chariot, like long-winged birds.
 90 And she [Demeter] was visited by grief [*akhos*] that was even more terrible
 than before: it makes you think of the Hound of Hadês.
 In her anger at the one who is known for his dark clouds, the son of Kronos,
 she shunned the company of gods and lofty Olympus.
 She went away, visiting the cities of humans, with all their fertile
 landholdings,
 shading over her appearance, for a long time. And not one of men,
 95 looking at her, could recognize her. Not one of women, either, who are
 accustomed to wear their girdles low-slung.^[5]
 Until, one day, she came to the house of bright-minded Keleos,
 who was at that time ruler of Eleusis, fragrant with incense.^[6]
 She sat down near the road, sad in her *philon* heart,
 at the well called Parthenion [the Virgin’s Place], where the people of the
polis^[7] used to draw water.
 100 She sat in the shade, under the thick growth of an olive tree,
 looking like an old woman who had lived through many years and who is
 deprived of giving childbirth and of the gifts of Aphrodite, lover of garlands
 in the hair.
 She was like those nursemaids who belong to kings, administrators of
themistes,
 and who are guardians of children in echoing palaces.
 105 She was seen by the daughters of Keleos, son of Eleusinos,

who were coming to get water, easy to draw [from the well], in order to
carry it
in bronze water-jars to the *phila* home of their father.

There were four of them, looking like goddesses with their bloom of
adolescence:

Kallidikê, Kleisidikê, and lovely Dêmô.

110 And then there was Kallithoê, who was the eldest of them all.
They did not recognize her [Demeter]. Gods are hard for mortals to see.
They [the daughters] stood near her and spoke these winged words:
“Who are you, and where are you from, old woman, old among old humans?
Why has your path taken you far away from the *polis*? Why have you not
drawn near to the palace?

115 There, throughout the shaded chambers, are women
who are as old as you are, and younger ones too,
who would welcome you in word and in deed.”

So she spoke.^[8] And the Lady Goddess spoke with the following words:

“*Phila* children! Whoever women you are among the female kind of
humans,

120 I wish you *kharis* [‘I wish you pleasure and happiness from our relationship,
starting now’]. I shall tell you. It is not unseemly,
since you ask, for me to tell you *alêthea*.

Dôsô^[9] is my name. It was given to me by my honored mother.

But that was then. I am from Crete, having traveled over the wide stretches
of sea

against my will. Without my consent, by *biâ*, by duress,

125 I was abducted by pirates. After a while,
sailing with their swift ship, they landed at the harbor of Thorikos. There the
ship was boarded by women

of the mainland, many of them. They [the pirates]
started preparing dinner next to the prow of the beached ship.

But my *thûmos* did not yearn for food, that delight of the mind.

130 I stole away and set out to travel over the dark earth of the mainland, fleeing
my arrogant captors. This way, I stopped them
from drawing any benefit from my worth without having paid the price.

That is how I got here, in the course of all my wanderings. And I do not
know

what this land is and who live here.
 135 But I pray to all the gods who abide on Olympus that you be granted
 vigorous husbands and that you be able to bear children,
 in accordance with the wishes of your parents. As for me, young girls, take
 pity.
 To be honest about it, what I want is for you to name for me a house to go to,
 the house of someone, man or woman, who has *phila* children to be
 taken care of.^[10]
 I want to work for them,
 140 honestly. The kind of work that is cut out for a female who has outlived
 others her own age.
 I could take some newborn baby in my arms,
 and nourish him well. I could watch over his house.
 I would make his bed in the inner recesses of well-built chambers,
 the royal bed. And I could see to a woman's tasks."
 145 So spoke the goddess. And she was answered straightaway by the unwed
 maiden,
 Kallidikê, the most beautiful of the daughters of Keleos:
 "Old Mother, we humans endure the gifts the gods give us, even when we
 are grieving over what has to be.^[11]
 They [the gods] are, after all, far better than we are.
 What I now say will be clear advice, and I will name for you
 150 the men who have the great control, divinely given, of *tîmê* here:
 the men who stand at the forefront of the *dêmos* and who protect the citadel
 of the *polis*
 with their wise counsel and their straight *dikai*.
 And then there are the wives too: of sound-minded Triptolemos, of Dioklos,
 of Polyxenos, of faultless Eumolpos as well,
 155 of Dolikhos, and of our splendid father [Keleos].
 The wives of all of these manage the palace.^[12]
 Of these women, not a single one of them, when they first look at you,
 would deprive you of *tîmê*, the way you look, and turn you away from the
 palace.
 Rather, they will receive you. For, right now, you look like the gods.
 160 If you wish, wait for us, while we go to the palace of our father
 and tell our mother, Metaneira with the low-slung girdle,

all these things from beginning to end, in the hope that she will tell you
 to come to our house and not to seek out the houses of others.[\[13\]](#)
 She has a treasured son, growing up in the well-built palace.

165 He was born late, after many a prayer for the birth of a son: a great joy to
 his parents.
 If you nourish him to grow till he reaches the crossing-point of life, coming
 of age,
 I can predict that you will be the envy of any woman who lays eyes on you.
 That is how much compensation she [Metaneira] would give you in return
 for raising him.”

So she [Kallidikê] spoke. And she [Demeter] nodded her assent. So they,
 170 filling their splendid jars with water, carried it off, looking magnificent.
 Swiftly they came to the great palace of their father, and quickly they told
 their mother
 what they saw and heard.[\[14\]](#) And she told them
 quickly to go and invite her [Demeter] for whatever wages, no limits,
 and they, much as deer or heifers in the *hôrâ* of spring

175 prance along the meadow, satiating their dispositions as they graze on the
 grass,
 so also they, hitching up the folds of their lovely dresses,
 dashed along the rutted roadway, their hair flowing
 over their shoulders, looking like crocus blossoms.
 They found the illustrious goddess sitting near the road, just the way
 180 they had left her. Then they led her to the *phila* palace of their father.
 She was walking behind them, sad in her *philon* heart.
 She was wearing a veil on her head, and a long dark robe [*peplos*]
 trailed around the delicate feet of the goddess.[\[15\]](#)
 Straightaway they came to the palace of sky-nurtured[\[16\]](#) Keleos.

185 They went through the hall, heading for the place where their mistress, their
 mother,
 was sitting near the threshold of a well-built chamber,
 holding in her lap her son, a young seedling. And they ran over
 to her side. She [Demeter] in the meantime went over to the threshold and
 stood on it, with feet firmly planted, and her head
 reached all the way to the ceiling. And she filled the whole indoors with a
 divine light.

190 She [Metaneira] was seized by a sense of *aidôs*, by a holy wonder, by a blanching fear.
She [Metaneira] yielded to her [Demeter] the chair on which she was sitting, and she told her to sit down.
But Demeter, the bringer of *hōrai*, the giver of splendid gifts, refused to sit down on the splendid chair,
but she stood there silent, with her beautiful eyes downcast,
195 until Iambê, the one who knows what is worth caring about [*kednon*] and what is not, set down for her a well-built stool, on top of which she threw a splendid fleece.[\[17\]](#)
On this she [Demeter] sat down, holding with her hands a veil before her face.
For a long time she sat on the stool, without uttering a sound, in her sadness. And she made no approach, either by word or by gesture, to anyone.
200 Unsmiling, not partaking of food or drink, she sat there, wasting away with yearning for her daughter with the low-slung girdle,
until Iambê,[\[18\]](#) the one who knows what is dear and what is not, started making fun.
Making many jokes, she turned the Holy Lady's disposition in another direction,
making her smile and laugh and have a merry *thûmos*.
205 Ever since, she [Iambê] has been pleasing her [Demeter] with the sacred rites.
Then Metaneira offered her [Demeter] a cup, having filled it with honey-sweet wine.
But she refused, saying that it was divinely ordained that she not drink red wine. Then she [Demeter] ordered her [Metaneira] to mix some barley and water
with delicate pennyroyal, and to give her [Demeter] that potion to drink.
210 So she [Metaneira] made the *kukeôn*[\[19\]](#) and offered it to the goddess, just as she had ordered.
The Lady known far and wide as Dêô[\[20\]](#) accepted it, for the sake of the *hosia*.[\[21\]](#)
Then well-girded Metaneira spoke up in their midst:

“Woman, I wish you *kharis* [‘I wish you pleasure and happiness from our relationship, starting now’]. I speak this way because I think you are descended not from base parents
but from noble ones. You have the look of *aidôs* in your eyes,
215 and the look of *kharis*, just as if you were descended from kings, who uphold the *themistes*.
We humans endure the gifts the gods give us, even when we are grieving over what has to be.
The yoke has been placed on our neck.
But now that you have come here, there will be as many things that they give to you as they give to me.
Take this little boy of mine and nourish him. He is late-born, and it was beyond my expectations
220 that the immortals could have given him to me. I prayed many times to have him.
If you nourish him to grow till he reaches the crossing-point of life, coming of age,
I can predict that you will be the envy of any woman who lays eyes on you.
That is how much compensation I [Metaneira] would give you in return for raising him.”
Then Demeter, with the beautiful garlands in her hair, addressed her:
225 “Woman, I wish you *kharis* back, and then some. May the gods give you good things.
With positive intentions, I will take your little boy as you tell me to.
I will nourish him, and I do not expect that, through the inadvertence of her nursemaid,
he would perish from a pestilence or from the Undercutter.[\[22\]](#)
I know an antidote[\[23\]](#) that is far more powerful than the Woodcutter;[\[24\]](#)
230 I know a genuine remedy for the painful pestilence.”
Having so spoken, she took the child to her fragrant bosom,
in her immortal hands. And the mother [Metaneira] rejoiced in her mind.
And thus it came to pass that the splendid son of bright-minded Keleos, Dêmophôn,[\[25\]](#) who was born to well-girded Metaneira,
235 was nourished in the palace, and he grew up like a *daimôn*,
not eating grain, not sucking from the breast. But Demeter used to anoint him with ambrosia, as if he had been born of the goddess,

and she would breathe down her sweet breath on him as she held him to her bosom.

At nights she would conceal him within the *menos* of fire, as if he were a smoldering log,
240 and his *philo*i parents were kept unaware. But they marveled at how full in bloom he came to be, and to look at him was like looking at the gods.[26]

Now Demeter would have made him ageless and immortal if it had not been for the heedlessness of well-girded Metaneira, who went spying one night, leaving her own fragrant bedchamber,
245 and caught sight of it [what Demeter was doing]. She let out a shriek and struck her two thighs,[27]

afraid for her child. She had made a big mistake in her *thûmos*.

Weeping, she spoke these winged words:

“My child! Demophon! The stranger, this woman, is making you disappear in a mass of flames!

This is making me weep in lamentation [*goos*]. This is giving me baneful anguish!”

250 So she spoke, weeping. And the resplendent goddess heard her. Demeter, she of the beautiful garlands in the hair, became angry at her [Metaneira].

She [Demeter] took her [Metaneira’s] *philos* little boy, who had been born to her mother in the palace, beyond her expectations, —she took him in her immortal hands and put him down on the floor, away from her.[28]

255 She had taken him out of the fire, very angry in her *thûmos*, and straightaway she spoke to well-girded Metaneira:

“Ignorant humans! Heedless, unable to recognize in advance the difference between future good fortune [*aisa*] and future bad.

In your heedlessness, you have made a big mistake, a mistake without remedy.

260 I swear by the Styx,[29] the witness of oaths that gods make, as I say this: immortal and ageless for all days

would I have made your *philos* little boy, and I would have given him *tîmê* that is unwilting [*a-phthi-tos*].[30]

But now there is no way for him to avoid death and doom.[31]

Still, he will have a *tímê* that is unwilting [*a-phthi-tos*], for all time, because
 he had once sat
 on my knees and slept in my arms.
 265 At the right *hórâ*, every year,
 the sons of the Eleusinians will have a war, a terrible battle
 among each other. They will do so for all days to come. [32]
 I am Demeter, the holder of *tímai*. I am the greatest
 boon and joy for immortals and mortals alike.
 270 But come! Let a great temple, with a great altar at its base,
 be built by the entire *dêmos*. Make it at the foot of the acropolis and its steep
 walls.
 Make it loom over the well of Kallikhoron, [33] on a prominent hill.
 And I will myself instruct you in the sacred rites so that, in the future,
 you may perform the rituals in the proper way and thus be pleasing to my
noos.”
 275 So saying, the goddess changed her size [34] and appearance,
 shedding her old age, and she was totally enveloped in beauty.
 And a lovely fragrance wafted from her perfumed robes.
 The radiance of her immortal complexion
 shone forth from the goddess. Her blond hair streamed down her shoulder.
 280 The well-built palace was filled with light, as if from a flash of lightning.
 She went out of the palace, and straightaway her [Metaneira’s] knees
 buckled.
 For a long time she [Metaneira] was speechless. She did not even think of
 her treasured little boy, to pick him up from the floor.
 But his sisters heard his plaintive wailing,
 285 and they quickly ran downstairs from their well-cushioned bedrooms. One
 of them
 picked up the child in her arms, clasping him to her bosom.
 Another one rekindled the fire. Still another one rushed, with her delicate
 feet,
 to prop up her mother as she was staggering out of the fragrant room.
 They all bunched around the little boy, washing him as he gasped and
 spluttered.
 290 They all kept hugging him, but his *thûmos* could not be comforted.
 He was now being held by nursemaids who were far inferior.

All night they prayed to the illustrious goddess,
 trembling with fear. And when the bright dawn came,
 they told Keleos, who rules far and wide, exactly what happened,
 295 and what the goddess Demeter, the one with the beautiful garlands in the
 hair, instructed them to do.
 Then he [Keleos] assembled the masses of the people, from this end of the
 public place to the other,
 and he gave out the order to build, for Demeter with the beautiful hair, a
 splendid temple,
 and an altar too, on top of the prominent hill.
 And they obeyed straightaway, hearing his voice.
 300 They built it as he ordered. And the temple grew bigger and bigger, taking
 shape through the dispensation of the *daimôn*.^[35]
 When the people had finished their work and paused from their labor,
 they all went home. But blond-haired Demeter
 sat down and stayed there [in the temple], shunning the company of all the
 blessed ones [the gods].
 She was wasting away with yearning for her daughter with the low-slung
 girdle.
 305 She made that year the most terrible one for mortals, all over the Earth, the
 nurturer of many.
 It was so terrible, it makes you think of the Hound of Hadês. The Earth did
 not send up
 any seed. Demeter, she with the beautiful garlands in her hair, kept them [the
 seeds] covered underground..
 Many a curved plough was dragged along the fields by many an ox—all in
 vain.
 Many a bright grain of wheat fell into the earth—all for naught.
 310 At this moment, she [Demeter] could have destroyed the entire race of
 meropes^[36] humans
 with harsh hunger, thus depriving of their *tîmê*
 the dwellers of the Olympian abodes—[the *tîmê* of] sacrificial portions of
 meat for eating or for burning,^[37]
 if Zeus had not noticed with his *noos*, taking note in his *thûmos*.
 First, he sent Iris, with the golden wings, to summon
 315 Demeter with the splendid hair, with a beauty that is much loved.

That is what he told her to do. And she obeyed Zeus, the one with the dark
clouds, the son of Kronos,
and she ran the space between sky and earth quickly with her feet.[\[38\]](#)
She arrived at the city of Eleusis, fragrant with incense,
and she found in the temple Demeter, the one with the dark robe.
320 Addressing her, she spoke winged words:
“Demeter! Zeus, the one who has unwilting [*a-phthi-ta*] knowledge,
summons you
to come to that special group, the company of the immortal gods.
So then, come! May what my words say, which come from Zeus, not fail to
be turned into action that is completed.”
So she spoke, making an entreaty. But her [Demeter’s] *thûmos* was not
persuaded.
325 After that, the Father sent out all the other blessed and immortal gods.
They came one by one,
they kept calling out to her, offering many beautiful gifts,
all sorts of *tîmai* that she could choose for herself if she joined the company
of the immortal gods.
But no one could persuade her in her thinking or in her intention [*noêma*],
330 angry as she was in her *thûmos*, and she harshly said no to their words.
She said that she would never go to fragrant Olympus,
that she would never send up the harvest of the earth,
until she saw with her own eyes her daughter, the one with the beautiful
looks.
But when the loud-thunderer, the one who sees far and wide, heard this,
335 he sent to Erebos [Hadês] the one with the golden wand, the Argos-killer
[Hermes],[\[39\]](#)
so that he may persuade Hadês, with gentle words,
that he allow holy Persephone to leave the misty realms of darkness
and be brought up to the light in order to join the *daimones* [the gods in
Olympus], so that her mother may
see her with her own eyes and then let go of her anger.
340 Hermes did not disobey, but straightaway he headed down beneath the
depths of the earth,
rushing full speed, leaving behind the abode of Olympus.
And he found the Lord inside his palace,

seated on a funeral couch, along with his duly acquired bedmate,
 the one who was much under duress, yearning for her mother, and suffering
 from the unbearable things
 345 inflicted on her by the will of the blessed ones.[\[40\]](#)
 Going near him [Hadês] and stopping, the powerful Argos-killer said to him:
 “Hadês! Dark-haired one! King of the dead!
 Zeus the Father orders that I have splendid Persephone
 brought back up to light from Erebos back to him and his company, so that
 her mother
 350 may see her with her own eyes and let go of her wrath and terrible *mênis*
 against the immortals. For she [Demeter] is performing a mighty deed,
 to destroy [root *phthi-*] the tribes of earth-born humans, causing them to be
 without *menos*,
 by hiding the Seed underground—and she is destroying [root *phthi-*] the
tîmai
 of the immortal gods.[\[41\]](#) She has a terrible anger, and she refuses
 355 to keep company with the gods. Instead, far removed, she is seated inside
 a temple fragrant with incense. She has taken charge of the rocky citadel of
 Eleusis.”
 So he spoke. Hadês, King of the Dead, smiled
 with his brows,[\[42\]](#) and he did not disobey the order of Zeus the King.
 Swiftly he gave an order to bright-minded Persephone.
 360 “Go, Persephone, to your mother, the one with the dark robe.
 Have a kindly disposition and *thûmos* in your breast.
 Do not be too upset, excessively so.
 I will not be an unseemly husband to you, in the company of the immortals.
 I am the brother of Zeus the Father. If you are here,
 365 you will be queen of everything that lives and moves about,
 and you will have the greatest *tîmai* in the company of the immortals.
 Those who violate *dikê*— will get punishment for all days to come
 —those who do not supplicate your *menos* with sacrifice,
 performing the rituals in a reverent way, executing perfectly the offerings
 that are due.”
 370 So he spoke. And high-minded Persephone rejoiced.
 Swiftly she set out, with joy. But he [Hadês]
 gave her, stealthily, the honey-sweet berry of the pomegranate to eat,

peering around him.[\[43\]](#) He did not want her to stay for all time
over there, at the side of her honorable mother, the one with the dark robe.
375 The immortal horses were harnessed to the golden chariot
by Hadês, the one who makes many *sêmata*.
She got up on the chariot, and next to her was the powerful Argos-killer,
who took reins and whip into his *philai* hands
and shot out of the palace [of Hadês]. And the horses sped away eagerly.
380 Swiftly they made their way along the long journey. Neither the sea
nor the water of the rivers nor the grassy valleys
nor the mountain peaks could hold up the onrush of the immortal horses.
High over the peaks they went, slicing through the vast air.
He came to a halt at the place where Demeter, with the beautiful garlands in
the hair,
385 was staying, at the forefront of the temple fragrant with incense. When she
[Demeter] saw them,
she rushed forth like a maenad[\[44\]](#) down a wooded mountainslope.

387-400[\[45\]](#)

401 But when the earth starts blossoming with fragrant flowers of springtime,
flowers of every sort, then it is that you must come up from the misty realms
of darkness,
once again, a great thing of wonder to gods and mortal humans alike.
But what kind of ruse was used to deceive you by the powerful one, the one
who receives many
guests?"[\[46\]](#)
405 She [Demeter] was answered by Persephone, the most beautiful:
"So then, Mother, I shall tell you everything, without error.
When the messenger came to me, the swift Argos-killer,
with the news from my father, the son of Kronos, and from the other
dwellers in the sky,
that I should come from Erebos, so that you may see me with your own eyes
410 and let go of your wrath and terrible *mênis* against the immortals,
then I sprang up for joy, but he, stealthily,
put into my hand the berry of the pomegranate, that honey-sweet food,
and he compelled me by *biâ* to eat of it.

As for how it was that he [Hadês] snatched me away, through the *mêtis* of
 the son of Kronos,
 415 my father, and how he took me down beneath the depths of the earth,
 I will tell you and relate in order, as you ask.
 We were, all of us, going along the lovely meadow, I and
 Leukippê, Phainô, Elektra, Ianthê,
 Melitê, Iakhê, Rhodeia, Kallirrhoê,
 420 Mêlobosis, Tychê, and flower-faced Okyrrhoê,
 Chryseis, Ianeira, Akastê, Admêtê,
 Rhodopê, Ploutô, and lovely Kalypsô,
 Styx, Ourania, and lovely Galaxaura.
 Also Pallas [Athena], the one who rouses to battle, and Artemis, who
 delights in arrows.
 425 We were playing and gathering lovely flowers in our hands,
 an assortment of delicate crocus, iris, and hyacinth,
 rosebuds and lilies, a wonder to behold,
 and the narcissus, which is grown, like the crocus, by the wide earth.[\[47\]](#)
 I was joyfully gathering the flowers, and then the earth beneath me
 430 gave way, and there it was that he sprang out, the powerful lord who
 receives many guests.
 He took me away under the earth in his golden chariot.
 It was very much against my will. I cried with a piercing voice.
 These things, grieving, I tell you, and they are all *alêthea*.”
 In this way did the two of them spend the whole day, having a like-minded
thûmos,[\[48\]](#)
 435 and they gladdened greatly each other’s heart and *thûmos*,
 hugging each other, and their *thûmos* ceased having *akhos*.
 They received joy from each other, and gave it.
 Then Hekatê approached them, the one with the splendid headband.
 And she welcomed back the daughter of holy Demeter with many embraces.
 440 And from that day forward, the Lady [Hekatê] became her [Persephone’s]
 attendant and substitute queen.
 Then the loud-thundering Zeus, who sees far and wide, sent to them a
 messenger,
 Rhea with the beautiful hair, to bring Demeter, the one with the dark robe,
 to join the company of the special group of gods. And he promised *tîmai*

that he would give to her [Demeter], which she could receive in the company
of the immortal gods.

445 He [Zeus] assented that her daughter, every time the season came round,
would spend a third portion of the year in the realms of dark mist
underneath,
and the other two thirds in the company of her mother and the other
immortals.

So he spoke, and the goddess [Rhea] did not disobey the messages of Zeus.
Swiftly she darted off from the peaks of Olympus

450 and arrived at the Rarian Field,[\[49\]](#) the life-bringing fertile spot of land,
in former times, at least. But, at this time, it was no longer life-bringing, but
it stood idle
and completely without green growth. The bright grain of wheat had stayed
hidden underneath,
through the mental power of Demeter, the one with the beautiful ankles. But,
from this point on,

it began straightaway to flourish with long ears of grain

455 as the springtime was increasing its power. On the field, the fertile furrows
began to be overflow with cut-down ears of grain lying on the ground, while
the rest of what was cut down was already bound into sheaves.

This happened the moment she [Rhea] arrived from the boundless aether.

They [Demeter and Rhea] were glad to see each other, and they rejoiced in
their *thûmos*.

Then Rhea, the one with the splendid headband, addressed her [Demeter]:

460 “Come, child, Zeus the loud-thunderer, the one who sees far and wide, is
summoning you

to come to the company of that special group of gods. And he promised
tîmai

that he would give you, which you could receive in the company of the
immortal gods.

He [Zeus] assented that your daughter, every time the season comes round,

would spend a third portion of the year in the realms of dark mist
underneath,

465 and the other two thirds in your company and that of the other immortals.

He has assented to all this with the nod of his head.[\[50\]](#)

So come, my child! Obey! Do not be too

stubborn in your anger at the dark-clouded son of Kronos.
 Straightaway make the harvest grow, that life-bringer for humans.”

470 So she spoke, and Demeter, she with the beautiful garlands in her hair, did
 not disobey.
 Straightaway she sent up the harvest from the land with its rich clods of
 earth.
 And all the wide earth with leaves and blossoms
 was laden. Then she went to the kings, administrators of *themistes*,
 and she showed them—to Triptolemos, to Diokles, driver of horses,
 475 to powerful Eumolpos and to Keleos, leader of the people [*lâoi*]
 she revealed to them the way to perform the sacred rites, and she pointed out
 the ritual to all of them^[51]
 —the holy ritual, which it is not at all possible to ignore, to find out about,
 or to speak out. The great awe of the gods holds back any speaking out.

480 *Olbios* among earth-bound mortals is he who has seen these things.
 But whoever is uninitiated in the rites, whoever takes no part in them, will
 never get a share [*aisa*] of those sorts of things [that the initiated get],
 once they die, down below in the dank realms of mist.
 But when the resplendent goddess finished all her instructions,
 they [Demeter and Persephone] went to Olympus, to join the company of the
 other gods.

485 And there they abide at the side of Zeus, who delights in the thunderbolt.
 Holy they are, and revered. *Olbios* is he whom they,
 being kind, decide to love among earth-bound mortals.
 Straightaway they send to such a man, to reside at his hearth, in his great
 palace,
 Ploutos [Wealth personified], who gives riches to mortal humans.

490 But come, you goddesses, who have charge of the *dêmos* of Eleusis,
 fragrant with incense.
 and of Paros the island and rocky Antron.
 Come, O lady resplendent with gifts, queen Dêô [Demeter], bringer of *hôrai*,
 both you and your daughter, the most beautiful Persephone.
 Think kindly and grant, in return for this song, a rich means of livelihood
 that suits the *thûmos*.

495 And I will keep you in mind throughout the rest of my song.

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- [1] This name designates both the god of the underworld and the underworld itself.
- [2] As we shall now see, the narcissus is the trigger for the “trap door.”
- [3] On the division of the world, to be shared by the three brothers Zeus, Poseidon, and Hadês, cf. *Iliad* XV 189-191.
- [4] That is, with the dead.
- [5] Different locales had different traditions about where Demeter was first recognized and where her cult and her Mysteries were first established.
- [6] Eleusis is the locale of the Eleusinian Mysteries; both Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries were eventually appropriated by the *polis* of Athens.
- [7] That is, the *polis* of Eleusis.
- [8] Evidently the oldest sister was speaking on behalf of the others as well.
- [9] The name suggests somebody who is a ‘giver of gifts’.
- [10] The textual transmission is garbled here, and my translation of this line is tentative (the key, I propose, is in the connections with lines 149-150).
- [11] The “gifts of the gods” can be good fortune or bad fortune, making people rejoice or grieve. This theme is relevant to the *ad hoc* name of Demeter at line 122.
- [12] All this is an exercise in religious hindsight. The temple of “today” is the palace of “yesterday,” the age of heroes. The priest of “today,” descended as he is from an influential aristocratic family, is the king of “yesterday.” At a complex cult-center or “temple” like that of Eleusis, which is run by an accretive hierarchy of hereditary priesthoods, the religious hindsight requires that the accretion of priestly offices in the temple be retrojected as an aggregation of kings in the “palace,” who are also the cult-heroes in the “temple.” Notice that, although Kallidikê promises Demeter a catalogue of the kings, what she says turns out to be a catalogue of queens, who are named in terms of their husbands. The husbands are in the foreground, but the wives in the background are the ones who manage the palace. The kings are all special cult-heroes connected with the worship of Demeter. Triptolemos, the primeval Ploughman, is a local hero of Athens. Dioklos is a local hero of Megara (according to Megarean tradition, he was the Megarean ruler of Eleusis who was expelled by the Athenian hero Theseus: Plutarch *Theseus* 10; the Megarean character in Aristophanes *Acharnians* 774 swears by him as a cult-hero). We know less about Polyxenos, but here too we have evidence for his cult in symbiosis with the cult of Demeter; keeping in mind the theme of god-hero antagonism, I note that *poluxenos* ‘he who has many guests’ is a conventional epithet of Hadês. As for Eumolpos ‘he who sings and dances well’, he is the hero-ancestor of the ultimately dominant priestly family at the cult-

center of Eleusis; he represents the most current tradition in Eleusis itself. Dolikhos was a cult-hero connected with the Eleusinian Games (Richardson commentary p. 199). Keleos seems to be a figure parallel to Eumolpos (cf. Richardson commentary p. 303).

[13] Note the roles of the father and the mother.

[14] Again, note the roles of the father and the mother.

[15] Note the diametrical oppositions between Demeter and the girls, both in movement and in appearance. In the cult of Demeter, such diametrically opposite movements and appearances are suitable for ritual re-enactment, in song and dance, by ensembles of specially-chosen girls and women.

[16] An epithet appropriate to kings, reflecting a myth-pattern that connects royal sovereignty with dew from heaven.

[17] We know from other sources that such a stool with a fleece on it was a “prop” for the purification ritual at Eleusis.

[18] Iambê, as we shall now see, is a personification of the iambic tradition, which reflects a ritual discourse that provokes laughter *and thereby promotes fertility*. This discourse, which makes fun of its targets, is often obscene in nature. The obscenity, it goes without saying, is ritual obscenity.

[19] The name of a ritual potion in the Eleusinian Mysteries.

[20] Another name for Demeter.

[21] The *hosia* is whatever can be considered specific to the sphere of humans, not gods, in a ritual. For example, *hosia* is when humans take a drink at a ritual, whereas the god involved does not. From the standpoint of myth, however, when the ritual is founded, the god has to show the way by doing it first, so that humans will have precedent. In such a case, the god does it “for the sake of *hosia*” (cf. Richardson commentary p. 225).

[22] With reference to the cutting of roots: this riddling euphemism designates extracts that serve as ingredients for magic potions.

[23] Literally, an ‘anti-cutting’.

[24] Apparently the same threat as the Undercutter.

[25] Literally, ‘he who shines for the *dêmos*’.

[26] Commentary in Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans* pp. 181-182.

[27] With downturned palms: a ritual gesture, described also in the *Iliad*.

[28] In other versions, Demeter just leaves the baby in the fire, letting him perish right then and there (cf. Richardson commentary 244).

[29] Styx (the word *stux* conveys the nervous reaction of recoiling at something that is chillingly ice-cold) is a river in Hadês, and the gods swear by it when they guarantee the absolute truth of

what they are saying.

[30] Commentary in Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans* p. 184.

[31] In the present version of the Demeter myth, Metaneira's mistake thus causes the boy's eventual death. In other versions, as already mentioned, it causes the boy's immediate death in the fire.

[32] This refers to a ritual mock-battle at Eleusis, a quasi-athletic event known as the *Ballêtus*, which was officially held on a seasonally-recurring basis to compensate for the death of the baby cult-hero Demophon. This mock-battle seems to have been the ritual kernel of a whole complex of events known as the Eleusinian Games (cf. Richardson commentary p. 246). Parallels: the Nemean and the Isthmian Games, pan-Hellenic athletic events, were held on a seasonally-recurring basis to compensate for the deaths of the baby cult-heroes Arkhemoros and Melikertes respectively.

[33] Meaning: 'the beautiful place of dancing'.

[34] Gods are larger-than-life-size.

[35] I see here a veiled reference to the ultimate development of the entire religious complex of Eleusis.

[36] The meaning of this word is opaque; it probably conveys some mythological theme of anthropogony.

[37] There were two ways of offering meat to the gods: as portions to be set aside and eaten (e.g. by the priests) or to be burned on the altar. The gods give vegetation to humans, who give their meat-offerings to the gods. If humans get no vegetation in order to sustain their life, the gods cannot get meat-offerings to sustain their *timê*.

[38] Her golden wings are on her heels.

[39] Hermes was the killer of a monster called Argos, who was himself a Hermetic figure. The form *argos* conveys swiftness and brightness, and the form *Argei-phontês* may well convey both 'Argos-killer' and 'he who kills with swiftness and brightness'.

[40] The text of lines 349-350 is garbled, and the translation here is merely an approximation.

[41] Commentary on lines 351-354 in Nagy, *Best of the Achaeans* pp. 186-187.

[42] This is conventionally said about a "knowing" smile: Hadês knows more than he lets on.

[43] Hadês is acting furtively (Richardson commentary p. 277).

[44] Maenads are frenzied devotees of Bacchus = Dionysus.

[45] These lines are incomplete: the gaps in the text are caused by a tear in the manuscript (the *Hymn to Demeter* is preserved in only one medieval manuscript). The reconstructed context: Persephone also runs to her mother. Demeter finds out that Persephone has eaten of the pomegranate that had been offered her by Hadês. It is determined that Persephone must therefore stay in Hadês for one-third of the year, even though she may spend the other two-thirds with her mother.

[46] Demeter is asking Persephone this question.

[47]As we know from external sources, both the crocus and the narcissus are sacred to Demeter and Persephone.

[48]It is a religious principle that Demeter and Persephone, on the occasion of their mother-daughter reunion, are “like-minded.”

[49]A cult-place associated with the Eleusinian Mysteries and with the myth about the first ploughing. Demeter is here, at the time: see lines 457-458.

[50]There is a lacuna in the first part of this line.

[51]Editors tend to skip the next line, which repeats the names of some, but not all, of the recipients of Demeter’s revelation of sacred mysteries.