3. The rape of Persephone: Demeter’s descent to Hades

Introduction

- *The Homeric Hymns* are hexameter poems attributed to Homer in antiquity but now thought not to be written by him. Composed over long period of time and written down in surviving form at some point between 650 and 550 BC; sung prayers to particular deities.
- *Homeric Hymn to Demeter (HHD)* contains the earliest surviving literary account of the Persephone myth: the virgin (*kore*) Persephone is abducted by her uncle, Hades and taken down to the underworld. Persephone’s mother, Demeter, is so angry that the crops stop growing, which prompts Zeus (Persephone’s father) to persuade Hades to let Persephone return. But Hades tricks Persephone to eat a pomegranate seed, ensuring that she would stay with him under the earth for a third of the year, and be in the upper world for two thirds of the year.

1. The rape of Persephone

- Character of abduction and place of rape in ancient literature and society
- Persephone is abducted by Hades against her will but by permission of her father
- The pomegranate seed is given to Persephone stealthily by Hades, but when she recounts the story to her mother later, she stresses that it was forced upon her. What is the significance of the pomegranate and why does eating it give Hades power over Persephone?
- Myth provides etiology (explanation of cause) for the seasonal cycle of agriculture: Demeter’s grief leads to cessation of reproduction and fertility on earth; barren period connects perhaps to summer, rather than winter, and this perhaps connected to celebration of Eleusinian mysteries in autumn.
- Who rescues Persephone? In later versions of this myth, Demeter herself goes down to Hades to rescue her daughter, but in this earliest version, this was not possible as Hades was inaccessible to anyone except the god Hermes, who conducts souls and messages between lower and upper worlds. Demeter does, however, descend from mount Olympos and wander the earth, and her absence from the gods’ sphere is disruptive
- Eleusinian mysteries were celebrated every autumn at Eleusis in Attica, some 20 km from Athens, in honour of the 2 goddesses Demeter and Persephone; perhaps *HHD* was composed at Eleusis for performance at a festival.
- Festival at which Eleusinian Mysteries were celebrated involved public sacrifices to the gods and processions from centre of city of Athens to sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Attica, as well as secret rituals that took place behind closed doors for initiates only. The revelation of the Mysteries to initiates perhaps involved a dramatic night-time re-enactment of the story of the rape of Persephone and her return

2. Female experience and psychoanalytic interpretations

- *HHD* (and indeed the myth of Persephone itself) puts female experience at the centre of narrative (as did the Ishtar descent), and has thus often been used for feminist and psychoanalytic readings, examining
  - Demeter’s grief-stricken reaction to her daughter’s abduction, frantic search for her, and the mutual misery of mother and daughter at their separation (they long for each other with *pothos* - word for sexual desire)
  - Emphasis on erotic eye-contact and embraces between goddesses on their reunion
  - After reunion with her mother, Persephone is called *kore* once more
  - Poem is cyclical, not linear; mother and daughter separate and unite eternally in a seasonal pattern
  - Mother-daughter relationship of the myth has provoked particular psychoanalytic readings.

- In an essay on the subject, Jung considered Demeter and Persephone to be archetypes of mother and maiden (C. Jung, ‘The psychological aspects of the *kore*’, in Jung trans. Kerényi, Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Mythology of the Divine Child (1967), 156-77): ‘Since for years I have been observing and investigating the products of the unconscious in the widest sense of the word, namely dreams, fantasies, visions and delusions of the insane, I have not been able to avoid recognizing certain regularities, that is, types. There are types of situations and types of figures that repeat themselves frequently and have a corresponding meaning. I therefore employ the term ‘motif’ to designate these repetitions. …there are human figures that can be arranged under a series of archetypes, the chief of them being, according to my suggestion, the shadow, the wise old man, the child (including the child hero), the mother (primordial mother and earth mother) as a superordinate personality … and her counterpart the maiden…”
- Psychic figures were duplex, and could oscillate between positive and negative meanings; the *kore* figure could appear now as a mother, now as a maiden; every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter.
- Contemporary psychoanalytic use of Persephone myth by Kulish and Holtzman: a girl’s loss of virginity and entry into adult heterosexuality draw her away from her mother. They examine the dramatization of the pattern of separation which is followed by rapprochement between mother & daughter, and the depiction of compromise formation to resolve conflicts over love, desire, and loyalty to mother and father
  - Persephone myth became a paradigm in Greek art and literature for marriage: a Greek bride underwent a symbolic death, sacrificed by her father, before symbolic rebirth into a new household as wife and mother, much as Persephone was delivered by her father to her husband Hades
  - Marriage as a deceptive and cruel trick foisted on women by violence and or deception
Extracts from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, trans. H. P. Foley (1994)

1. (ll 3-9): ‘…Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, gave [Persephone] to Hades, / without the consent of Demeter of the bright fruit and golden sword, / as she played with the deep-breasted daughters of Ocean / plucking flowers in the lush meadow – roses, crocuses / and lovely violets, irises and hyacinth and the narcissus / which the earth grew as a snare for the flower-faced maiden / in order to gratify by Zeus’s design the Host-to-Many [Hades].

2. (ll 16-21): ‘…the Lord Host-to-Many [Hades] rose up on her / with his immortal horses, the celebrated son of Kronos; / he snatched the unwilling maid into his golden chariot / and led her off lamenting. She screamed with a shrill voice / calling on her father [Zeus], the son of Kronos highest and best.’

3. (l 30): ‘Against her will Hades took her by the design of Zeus.’

4. (ll 40-1): ‘Sharp grief seized [Demeter’s] heart, and she tore the veil / on her ambrosial hair with her own hands.’;

5. (ll 47-50): ‘Then for nine days divine Deo [Demeter] roamed over the earth, / holding torches ablaze in her hands; / in her grief she did not once taste ambrosia / or nectar sweet-to-drink, nor bathed her skin.’

6. (ll 90-1): ‘A more terrible and brutal grief seized the heart / of Demeter, angry now at the son of Kronos [Hades] with his dark clouds.’


8. (ll 305-13): ‘For mortals she [Demeter] ordained terrible and brutal year / on the deeply fertile earth. The ground released / no seed, for bright-crowned Demeter kept it buried. / In vain the oxen dragged many curved plows down the furrows. In vain much white barley fell on the earth, / She would have destroyed the whole mortal race … if Zeus had not seen and pondered their plight in his heart.’

9. (ll 335-9): ‘[Zeus sent Hermes] to Erebos with his golden staff to wheedle Hades with soft words / and lead back holy Persephone from the misty gloom / into the light to join the gods that her mother / might see her with her own eyes and desist from anger.’

10. (ll 342-4): ‘Hermes met lord Hades inside his dwelling, / reclining on a bed with his shy spouse, strongly reluctant / through desire [pothos] for her mother...’

11. (ll 363-9, Hades to Persphone): ‘in no way among immortals will I be an unsuitable spouse, / myself a brother of Father Zeus. And when you are there [upper world], / you will have power over all that lives and moves, / and you will possess the greatest honours among the gods. / There will be punishment for evermore for those wrongdoers / who fail to appease your power with sacrifices, performing proper rights and making due offerings.

12. (ll 371-4): ‘But he [Hades] gave her [Persephone] to eat a honey-sweet pomegranate seed, stealthily passing it around her, lest she once more stay forever by the side of Demeter of the dark robe.’

13. (ll 385-9): ‘…with one look [Demeter] darted / like a maenad down a mountain shaded with woods. / On her side Persephone, [seeing] her mother’s [radiant face], / [left chariot and horses] and leapt down to run / [and fall on her neck in passionate embrace].’

14. (ll 398-400, Demeter to Persephone): ‘But if [you tasted food], returning beneath [the earth] / you will stay a third part of the seasons [each year], / but two parts with myself and the other immortals.’

15. (ll 411-13, Persephone to Demeter): ‘…he stealthily / put in my mouth a food honey-sweet, a pomegranate seed / and compelled me against my will and by force to taste it.’

16. (ll 434-7): ‘Then all day long, their minds at one [homophrona], they soothed / each other’s heart and soul in many ways, / embracing fondly, and their spirits abandoned grief, / as they gave and received joy between them.’

17. (ll 480-2): ‘Blessed is the mortal on earth who has seen these rites, / but the uninitiate who has no share in them never /has the same lot, once dead in dreary darkness.’

Bibliography
H. P. Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (1994)