

The Homeric Hymn to Demeter

Translated by Helen P. Foley

Demeter I begin to sing, the fair-tressed awesome goddess, herself and her slim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneus** seized; Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, gave her, 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 Earth grew as a snare for the flower-faced maiden, in order to gratify by Zeus's design the Host-to-Many**, a flower wondrous and bright, awesome for all to see, for the immortals above and for mortals below. From its root a hundredfold bloom sprang up and smelled so sweet that the whole vast heaven above and the whole earth laughed, and the salty swell of the sea.

The girl marveled, and stretched out both hands at once to take the lovely toy. The earth with its wide ways yawned over the Nysian plain; the lord Host-to-Many 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, the son of Kronos highest and best.

Not one of the immortals or of humankind heard her voice, nor the olives bright with fruit, except the daughter of Persaios; tender of heart she heard it from her cave, Hekate of the delicate veil. And lord Helios, brilliant son of Hyperion, heard the maid calling her father the son of Kronos. But he sat apart from the gods, aloof in a temple ringing with prayers, and received choice offerings from humankind.

Against her will Hades took her by the design of Zeus with his immortal horses--her father's brother, Commander- and Host-to-Many, the many-named son of Kronos.

So long as the goddess gazed on earth and starry heaven, on the sea flowing strong and full of fish, and on the beams of the sun, she still hoped to see her dear mother and the race of immortal gods. For so long hope charmed her strong mind despite her distress. The mountain peaks and the depths of the sea echoed in response to her divine voice, and her goddess mother heard. Sharp grief seized her heart, and she tore the veil on her ambrosial hair with her own hands. She cast a dark cloak on her shoulders and sped like a bird over dry land and sea, searching. No one was willing to tell her the truth, not one of the gods or mortals; no bird of omen came to her as truthful messenger.

Then for nine days divine Deo*** 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. But when the tenth Dawn came shining on her, Hekate met her, holding a torch in her hands, to give her a message. She spoke as follows:

***Hades*

****Demeter*

"Divine Demeter, giver of seasons and glorious gifts, who of the immortals or mortal men seized Persephone and grieved your heart? For I heard a voice but did not see with my eyes who he was. To you I tell at once the whole truth." Thus Hekate spoke.

The daughter of fair-tressed Rheia*** said not a word, but rushed off at her side holding torches ablaze in her hands.

They came to Helios, observer of gods and mortals, and stood before his horses. The most August goddess spoke: "Helios respect me as a god does a goddess, if ever with word or deed did I please your heart and spirit. The daughter I bore, a sweet offshoot noble in form- I heard her voice throbbing through the barren air as if she were suffering violence.

But I did not see her with my eyes. With your rays, you look down through the bright air on the whole of the earth and the sea. Tell me the truth about my child. Have you somewhere seen who of gods or mortal men took her by force from me against her will and went away?" Thus she spoke and the son of Hyperion replied:

"Daughter of fair tressed Rheia, mighty Demeter, you will know the truth. For I greatly revere and pity you grieving for your slim ankle daughter. No other of the gods was to blame but cloud-gathering Zeus, who gave her to Hades his brother to be called his fertile wife. With his horses Hades Snatched her screaming into the misty gloom. But, Goddess, give up for good your great lamentation. You must not nurse in vain insatiable anger. Among the gods Aidoneus is not an unsuitable bridegroom, Commander to-Many and Zeus's own brother of the same stock. As for honor, he got his third at the world's first division and dwells with those whose rule has fallen to his lot."

He spoke and called to his horses. At his rebuke they bore the swift chariot lightly, like long winged birds.

A more terrible and brutal grief seized the heart of Demeter, angry now at the son of Kronos with his dark clouds. Withdrawing from the assembly of the gods and high Olympus, she went among the cities and fertile fields of men, disguising her beauty for a long time. No one of men nor deep-girt women recognized her when they looked, until she came to the house of skilful Keleos, the man then ruler of fragrant Eleusis.

There she sat near the road, grief in her heart, where citizens drew water from the Maiden's Well in the shade - an olive bush had grown overhead-like a very old woman cut off from childbearing and the gifts of garland-loving Aphrodite. Such are the nurses to children of law giving kings and the keepers of stores in their echoing halls.

The daughters of Keleos, son of Eleusis, saw her as they came to fetch water easy-to-draw and bring it in bronze vessels to their dear father's halls.

Like four goddesses they were in the flower of youth, Kallidike, Kleisidike, fair Demo, and Kallithoe, who was the eldest of them all. They did not know her--gods are hard for mortals to recognize. Standing near her, they spoke winged words.

****Demeter*

"Who are you, old woman, of those born long ago? From where? Why have you left the city and do not draw near its homes? Women are there in the shadowy halls, of your age as well as others born younger, who would care for you both in word and in deed." They spoke, and the most august goddess replied:

"Dear children, whoever of womankind you are, greetings. I will tell you my tale. For it is not wrong to tell you the truth now you ask. Doso is my name, which my honoured mother gave me. On the broad back of the sea I have come now from Crete, by no wish of my own. By force and necessity pirate men led me off against my desire. Then they put into Thorikos in their swift ship, where the women stepped all together onto the mainland, and the men made a meal by the stern of the ship. My heart did not crave a heartwarming dinner, but racing in secret across the dark mainland I escaped from my arrogant masters, lest they should sell me, as yet unbought, for a price overseas. Then wandering I came here and know not at all what land this is and who lives here. But may all the gods who dwell on Olympus give you husbands to marry and children to bear, such as parents wish for. Now pity me, maidens, and tell me, dear children, with eager goodwill, whose house I might come to, a man's or a woman's, there to do for them gladly such tasks as are done by an elderly woman. I could nurse well a newborn child, embracing it in my arms, or watch over a house. I could spread out the master's bed in a recess of the well-built chamber and teach women their work." So spoke the goddess.

To her replied at once Kallidike, a maiden unwed, in beauty the best of Keleos daughters.

"Good mother, we mortals are forced, though it hurt us, to bear the gifts of the gods; for they are far stronger. To you I shall explain these things clearly and name the men to whom great power and honor belong here, who are first of the people and protect with their counsels and straight judgments the high walls of the city:

There is Triptolemos subtle in mind and Dioklos, Polyxenos and Eumolpos the blameless, Dolichos and our own lordly father. And all these have wives to manage their households. Of these not one at first sight would scorn your appearance and turn you away from their homes. They will receive you, for you are indeed godlike. But if you wish, wait here, until we come to the house of our father and tell Metaneira our deep-girt mother all these things straight through, in case she might bid you come to our house and not search after others'. For her only son is now nursed in our well-built hall, a late-born child, much prayed for and cherished. If you might raise him to the threshold of youth, any woman who saw you would feel envy at once, such rewards for his rearing our mother will give you."

Thus they spoke and she nodded her head. The girls carried proudly bright jars filled with water and swiftly they reached the great house of their father. At once to their mother they told what they saw and heard. She bade them go quickly to offer a boundless wage.

Just as hinds or heifers in the season of spring bound through the meadow sated with fodder, so they, lifting the folds of their shimmering robes, darted down the hollow wagon-track, and their hair danced on their shoulders like a crocus blossom. They found the famed goddess near the road just where they had left her. Then to the house of their father they led her. She, grieved in her heart, walked behind with veiled head. And her dark robe swirled round the slender feet of the goddess.

They soon reached the house of god-cherished Keleos, and went through the portico to the place where their regal mother sat by the pillar of the close-fitted roof, holding on her lap the child, her young offshoot.

To her they raced. But the goddess stepped on the threshold. Her head reached the roof and she filled the doorway with divine light. Reverence, awe, and pale fear seized Metaneira. She gave up her chair and bade the goddess sit down. But Demeter, bringer of seasons and giver of rich gifts, did not wish to be seated on the shining seat. She waited resistant, her lovely eyes cast down, until knowing lambe set out a well-built stool for her and cast over it a silvery fleece.

Seated there, the goddess drew the veil before her face. For a long time she sat voiceless with grief on the stool and responded to no one with word or gesture. Unsmiling, tasting neither food nor drink, she sat wasting with desire for her deep-girt daughter, until knowing lambe jested with her and mocking with many a joke moved the holy goddess to smile and laugh and keep a gracious heart-lambe, who later pleased her moods as well.

Metaneira offered a cup filled with honey-sweet wine, but Demeter refused it. It was not right, she said, for her to drink red wine; then she bid them mix barley and water with soft mint and give her to drink. Metaneira made and gave the drink to the goddess as she bid. Almighty Deo received it for the sake of the rite.

Well-girt Metaneira spoke first among them:

"Hail, lady, for I suppose your parents are not lowborn, but noble. Your eyes are marked by modesty and grace, even as those of justice-dealing kings. We mortals are forced, though it may hurt us, to bear the gifts of the gods. For the yoke lies on our necks. But now you have come here, all that's mine will be yours. Raise this child for me, whom the gods provided late-born and unexpected, much prayed for by me. If you raise him and he comes to the threshold of youth, any woman who saw you would feel envy at once, such rewards for his rearing would I give you."

Rich-crowned Demeter addressed her in turn:

"Hail also to you, lady, may the gods give you blessings. Gladly will I embrace the child as you bid me.

I will raise him, nor do I expect a spell or the Undercutter to harm him through the negligence of his nurse. For I know a charm more cutting than the Woodcutter; I know a strong safeguard against baneful bewitching."

So speaking, she took the child to her fragrant breast with her divine hands. And his mother was glad at heart.

Thus the splendid son of skillful Keleos, Demophoön, whom well-girt Metaneira bore, she nursed in the great halls. And he grew like a divinity, eating no food nor sucking [at a mother's breast]; [For daily well-crowned divine] Demeter anointed him with ambrosia like one born from a god and breathed sweetly on him, held close to her breast.

At night, she would bury him like a brand in the fire's might, unknown to his own parents. And great was their wonder as he grew miraculously fast; he was like the gods. She would have

made him ageless and immortal, if well-girt Metaneira had not in her folly kept watch at night from her fragrant chamber and spied. But she shrieked and struck both thighs in fear for her child, much misled in her mind, and in her grief, she spoke winged words.

"Demophoon, my child, the stranger buries you deep in the fire, causing me woe and bitter cares." Thus she spoke lamenting. The great goddess heard her.

In anger at her, bright-crowned Demeter snatched from the flames with immortal hands the dear child Metaneira had borne beyond hope in the halls and, raging terribly at heart, cast him away from herself to the ground. At the same time she addressed well-girt Metaneira:

"Mortals are ignorant and foolish, unable to foresee destiny, the good and the bad coming on them. You are incurably misled by your folly. Let the god's oath, the implacable water of Styx, be witness, I would have made your child immortal and ageless forever; I would have given him unfailing honour. But now he cannot escape death and the death spirits. Yet unfailing honours will forever be his, because he lay on my knees and slept in my arms.

In due time as the years come round for him, the sons of Eleusis will continue year after year to wage war and dread combat against each other. For I am honoured Demeter, the greatest source of help and joy to mortals and immortals. But now let all the people build me a great temple with an altar beneath, under the sheer wall of the city on the rising hill above Kallichoron. I myself will lay down the rites so that hereafter performing due rites you may propitiate my spirit."

Thus speaking, the goddess changed her size and appearance, thrusting off old age. Beauty breathed about her and from her sweet robes a delicious fragrance spread; a light beamed far out from the goddess's immortal skin, and her golden hair flowed over her shoulders. The well-built house flooded with radiance like lightning.

She left the halls. At once Metaneira's knees buckled. For a long time she remained voiceless, forgetting to pick up her dear only son from the floor. But his sisters heard his pitiful voice and leapt from their well-spread beds. Then one took the child in her arms and laid him to her breast. Another lit the fire; a third rushed on delicate feet to rouse her mother from her fragrant chamber. Gathering about the gasping child, they bathed and embraced him lovingly. Yet his heart was not comforted, for lesser nurses and handmaids held him now.

All night they tried to appease the dread goddess, shaking with fear. But when dawn appeared, they explained to wide-ruling Keleos exactly what the bright-crowned goddess Demeter commanded. Then he called to assembly his innumerable people and bid them build for fair-tressed Demeter a rich temple and an altar on the rising hill. Attentive to his speech, they obeyed at once and did as he prescribed. It grew as the goddess decreed. But once they finished and ceased their toil, each went off home. Then golden-haired Demeter remained sitting apart from all the immortals, wasting with desire for her deep-girt daughter.

For mortals she ordained a 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 by cruel famine and stolen the glorious honour of gifts and sacrifices from those having homes on Olympus, if Zeus had not seen and pondered their plight in his heart.

First he roused golden-winged Iris to summon fair-tressed Demeter, so lovely in form. Zeus spoke and Iris obeying the dark-clouded son of Kronos, raced swiftly between heaven and earth. She came to the citadel of fragrant Eleusis and found in her temple dark-robed Demeter. Addressing her, she spoke winged words:

"Demeter, Zeus, the father, with his unflinching knowledge bids you rejoin the tribes of immortal gods. Go and let Zeus's word not remain unfulfilled."

Thus she implored, but Demeter's heart was unmoved.

Then the father sent in turn all the blessed immortals; one by one they kept coming and pleading and offered her many glorious gifts and whatever honours she might choose among the immortal gods. Yet not one could bend the mind and thought of the raging goddess, who harshly spurned their pleas. Never, she said, would she mount up to fragrant Olympus nor release the seed from the earth, until she saw with her eyes her own fair-faced child.

When Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, heard this, he sent down the Slayer of Argos**** to Erebus 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 so that her mother might see her with her eyes and desist from anger. Hermes did not disobey. At once he left Olympus's height and plunged swiftly into the depths of the earth.

He met lord Hades inside his dwelling,

Reclining on a bed with his shy spouse, strongly reluctant through desire for her mother. Still she, Demeter, was brooding on revenge for the deeds of the blessed gods. The strong Slayer of Argos stood near and spoke:

"Dark-haired Hades, ruler of the dead, Father Zeus bids me lead noble Persephone up from Erebus to join us, so that her mother might see her with her eyes and cease from anger and dread wrath against the gods. For she is devising a great scheme to destroy the helpless race of mortals born on earth, burying the seed beneath the ground and obliterating divine honours. Her anger is terrible, nor does she go among the gods but sits aloof in her fragrant temple, keeping to the rocky citadel of Eleusis."

Thus he spoke and Aidoneus, lord of the dead, smiled with his brows, nor disobeyed king Zeus's commands. At once he urged thoughtful Persephone:

"Go, Persephone, to the side of your dark-robed mother, keeping the spirit and temper in your breast benign. Do not be so sad and angry beyond the rest; in no way among immortals will I be an unsuitable spouse, myself a brother of father Zeus. And when you are there, you will have power over all that lives and moves, and you will possess the greatest honours among the gods. There will be punishment forevermore for those wrongdoers who fail to appease

**** *Hermes*

your power with sacrifices, performing proper rites and making due offerings." Thus he spoke and thoughtful Persephone rejoiced.

Eagerly she leapt up for joy. But he gave her to eat a honey-sweet pomegranate seed, stealthily passing it around her, lest she once more stay forever by the side of revered Demeter of the dark robe.

Then Aidoneus commander-to-many yoked his divine horses before the golden chariot. She mounted the chariot and at her side the strong Slayer of Argos took the reins and whip in his hands and dashed from the halls. The horses flew eagerly; swiftly they completed the long journey; not sea nor river waters, not grassy glens nor mountain peaks slowed the speed of the immortal horses, slicing the deep air as they flew above these places. He brought them to a halt where rich-crowned Demeter waited before the fragrant temple.

With one look, she darted out 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). [While holding her dear child in her arms], her [heart suddenly sensed a trick. Fearful, she] drew back from [her embrace and at once inquired:]

"My child, tell me, you [did not taste] food [while below?] Speak out [and hide nothing, so we both may know.][For if not], ascending [from miserable Hades], you will dwell with me and your father, the dark-clouded [son of Kronos], honored by all the gods. 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. When the earth blooms in spring with all kinds of sweet flowers, then from the misty dark you will rise again, a great marvel to gods and mortal men. By what guile did the mighty Host-to-Many deceive you?"

Then radiant Persephone replied to her in turn:

"I will tell you the whole truth exactly, Mother. The Slayer of Argos came to bring fortunate news from my father, the son of Kronos, and the other gods and lead me from Erebus so that seeing me with your eyes you would desist from your anger and dread wrath at the gods. Then I leapt up for joy, but 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. For the rest-how seizing me by the shrewd plan of my father, Kronos's son, he carried me off into the earth's depths-I shall tell and elaborate all that you ask. We were all in the beautiful meadow_ Leukippe; Phaino; Elektra; and lanthe; Melite; Iachê; Rhodeia; and Kallirhoe; Melibosis; Tyche; and fower-faced Okyrhoç; Khryseis; laneira; Akaste; Admete; Rhodopé; Plouto; and lovely Kalypso; Styx; Ourania; and fair Galaxaura; Pallas, rouser of battles; and Artemis, sender of arrows-playing and picking lovely flowers with our hands, soft crocus mixed with irises and hyacinth, rosebuds and lilies, a marvel to see, and the narcissus that wide earth bore like a crocus.

As I joyously plucked it, the ground gaped from beneath, and the mighty lord, Host-to-Many, rose from it and carried me off beneath the earth in his golden chariot much against my will. And I cried out at the top of my voice. I speak the whole truth, though I grieve to tell it."

Then all day long, their minds at one, 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. Hekate of the delicate veil drew near them and often caressed the daughter of holy Demeter; from that time this lady served her as chief attendant.

To them Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, sent as mediator fair-tressed Rheia to summon dark-robed Demeter to the tribes of gods; he promised to give her what honours she might choose among the gods. He agreed his daughter would spend one-third of the revolving year in the misty dark and two-thirds with her mother and the other immortals.

So he spoke and the goddess did not disobey his commands. She darted swiftly down the peaks of Olympus and arrived where the Rarian plain, once life-giving udder of earth, now giving no life at all, stretched idle and utterly leafless. For the white barley was hidden by the designs of lovely-ankled Demeter. Yet as spring came on, the fields would soon ripple with long ears of grain; and the rich furrows would grow heavy on the ground with grain to be tied with bands into sheaves. There she first alighted from the barren air.

Mother and daughter were glad to see each other and rejoiced at heart. Rheia of the delicate veil then said:

"Come, child, Zeus, heavy-thundering and mighty-voiced, summons you to rejoin the tribes of the gods, he has offered to give what honours you choose among them.

He agreed that his daughter would spend one-third of the revolving year in the misty dark, and two-thirds with her mother and the other immortals. He guaranteed it would be so with a nod of his head. So come, my child, obey me; do not rage overmuch and forever at the dark-clouded son of Kronos. Now make the grain grow fertile for humankind."

So Rheia spoke, and rich-crowned Demeter did not disobey.

At once she sent forth fruit from the fertile fields and the whole wide earth burgeoned with leaves and flowers. She went to the kings who administer law, Triptolemos and Diokles, driver of horses, mighty Eumolpos and Keleos, leader of the people, and revealed the conduct of her rites and taught her Mysteries to all of them, holy rites that are not to be transgressed, nor pried into, nor divulged. For a great awe of the gods stops the voice.

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 the dreary darkness. When the great goddess had founded all her rites, the goddesses left for Olympus and the assembly of the other gods.

There they dwell by Zeus delighting-in-thunder, inspiring awe and reverence. Highly blessed is the mortal on earth whom they graciously favour with love. For soon they will send to the hearth of his great house Ploutos, the god giving abundance to mortals.

But come, you goddesses, dwelling in the town of fragrant Eleusis, and seagirt Paros, and rocky Antron, revered Deo, mighty giver of seasons and glorious gifts, you and your very fair daughter Persephone, for my song grant gladly a living that warms the heart. And I shall remember you and a new song as well.