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Homeric Hymn To Demeter

translated by Diane J. Rayor
(for my son Daniel)



In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, Hades (the god of death) kidnaps Persephone, who is the daughter of the grain goddess

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Demeter, taking her to the Underworld to be his queen. By the end of the song, Demeter has won Persephone's cyclic return. The Hymn, probably composed in the seventh century B.C.E., is one of a group of anonymous poems celebrating the ancient Greek gods. It is written in the same dactylic hexameter as Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. See H. Foley's Homeric Hymn to Demeter for a full discussion.

1 **I** sing of the revered goddess, rich-haired Demeter,
and her long-legged daughter whom Hades snatched
(loud-rumbling, thundering Zeus gave her away)
while she played with the virgin daughters of Ocean,
far from Golden Grain Demeter, who bears shining fruit.
She picked lush meadow flowers: roses, crocuses,
lovely violets, irises, hyacinths—and a narcissus
Gaia grew as a lure for the blossoming girl,
following Zeus's bidding, to please Lord Hades.
Everyone marvelled at the bewitching sight,
11 immortal gods and mortal folk alike:
from its root blossomed a hundred sweetly
scented heads, and all wide heaven above,
all earth, and the salty swell of the sea laughed.
Amazed, she stretched out both hands to pick
the charming bloom—and a chasm opened
in the Nyssian Plain. Out sprang Lord Hades,
god of many names, on his immortal horses.
Snatching the unwilling girl, he carried her off
in his golden chariot, as she cried and screamed aloud
21 calling to her father, son of Kronos, highest and best.

None of the immortal gods or mortal folk
heard her cry, nor the Olive shining with fruit—
except the daughter of Perses, tender-hearted
Hekate, veiled in light, heard from her cave
and Lord Helios Hyperion's shining son
heard the girl calling to her father, son of Kronos.
Zeus sat far away from the gods, in his temple echoing
with prayers, accepting rich offerings from mortals.
But her father's brother, Kronos' son of many names,
31 Lord of the Dead, stole the unwilling girl

away on his immortal horses, with a nod from Zeus.
 While the goddess could still gaze at earth
 and starry heaven, strong rush of the fish abundant sea
 and sun's rays, she still hoped to see her dear mother
 and the race of gods who live forever:
 hope yet charmed her strong mind though she grieved.
 But the mountain peaks and the sea depths echoed
 with her eternal cry, and her goddess mother heard her.
 Sharp grief seized her heart; with both hands
 41 she tore the veil from her ambrosial hair,
 threw a black cloak across her shoulders
 and sped like a bird over the nourishing land and sea,
 searching; but none of the immortal gods
 or mortal folk would tell her the truth,
 nor did omen birds come bearing messages.

Nine days Divine Demeter wandered
 the earth, blazing torches in her hands,
 nor did she eat ambrosia or sip sweet nectar once
 while grieving, or wash her skin clean.
 51 But when the tenth shining Dawn appeared,
 Hekate met her with torches in her own hands
 and drew close, speaking these words:

“Divine Demeter, who brings seasons, bears shining fruit,
 which one of the heavenly gods or mortal folk
 seized Persephone and grieved your spirit?
 I heard her cry, but with my own eyes didn't see
 who did it. I am telling you the whole truth.”

Hekate asked, but the daughter of rich-haired Rhea
 did not wait to reply. Quickly she rushed away,
 61 blazing torches in her hands, Hekate at her side.

They came to Helios, who watches gods and mortals,
and stood before his horses. The heavenly goddess said:

“Helios, respect me as a goddess among gods, if ever before
with words or deeds I cheered your heart and soul.
The girl I bore, a sweet blossom, a joy to see,
I heard her screams through the barren air
as if she was taken by force, but I didn’t see her.
Yet you gaze through the bright air with your rays
over the whole wide earth and sea:
71 Tell me truly of my dear child, if you saw
who stole her away from me, against her will,
and is gone, what god or mortal man?”

She asked and Helios answered back:

“Divine Demeter, daughter of rich-haired Rhea,
you will know: I do greatly respect you and pity
your grief over your slender child. No other
god arranged it but cloud-gathering Zeus,
who gave her to his own brother Hades to be called
81 his young wife. He carried her off on his horses
into the misty darkness while she screamed aloud.
But, Goddess, give up your strong grief; let go
of your infinite anger. Hades isn’t an unsuitable
husband among the gods: Lord of the Many Dead,
your own brother from the same seed. As for honor,
he won the third share back when the division was made
and now lives among those whom he was allotted to rule.”

After speaking, Helios called to his horses, who at his shout
bore the swift chariot quickly like long-winged birds.
But a grief more dread and more bitter came over her.

- 91 Then, furious at Zeus who darkens clouds,
 she withdrew from the assembly of gods and high Olympos
 and wandered the cities and rich fields of humans,
 disguising her form for a long time. Nor did any man
 or woman recognize her when they looked,
 until she came to the house of thoughtful Keleos,
 who then was ruler of incense-offering Eleusis.
 She sat near the road, her heart sorrowing,
 by Maiden Well where townsfolk drew water,
 an olive tree spreading shade above her;
- 101 she looked like an old woman born long ago,
 without a child or gifts of garland-loving Aphrodite,
 like a nurse for the children of a righteous king
 or a housekeeper in the king's echoing palace.
 The daughters of Keleos, son of Eleusinos, saw her
 as they came to draw the well-water and bring it
 in bronze pitchers to their father's house.
 Like four goddesses, they bloomed with youth:
 Kallidike, Kleisidike, lovely Demo,
 and Kallithoe, eldest of them all.
- 111 They didn't know her, for mortals have trouble seeing gods.
 Flocking near her, their words flew out swiftly:

“Who are you and where from, old woman of elder folk?
 Why do you stay far from the city and not draw near
 the homes? There are women in the shady halls
 the same age as you and those younger
 who would treat you well both in word and deed.”

They asked her, and the divine goddess answered:

“Dear children, whoever you are of womankind,
 greetings. Since you ask, I will tell you my tale;

- 121 it is right to tell you the truth:
Doso is my name, given by my lady mother.
I came from Crete upon the sea's wide back,
not wanting to, but forced against my will,
stolen away by pirates. When they landed
their swift ship at Thorikos, the women
set foot on land all together, and the pirates
prepared dinner beside the ship's stern cables.
But my spirit longed for no pleasant meal.
Secretly hurrying through the darkened land
- 131 I fled my arrogant leaders, so they couldn't sell me,
an unbought slave, and enjoy my purchase price.
After wandering so, I came here, not knowing at all
what land this is or who lives here.
Yet may all those in Olympian homes
grant you true husbands and child-bearing
as your parents wish: now pity me, girls,
(missing line)
dear children, tell me what man and wife's house
I might go to, and so work for them gladly
at whatever tasks an old woman can do:
- 141 I could nurse a newborn babe in my arms
quite well, guard the house and make up
the master's bed within his well-built room,
and guide the women in all their work."

So the goddess said. Quickly the girl, Kallidike,
Keleos' most beautiful daughter, replied:

"Good mother, the gods' gifts and griefs by necessity
we humans must endure—gods are much more powerful.
I will tell you everything clearly and name
the men who have great strength of honor here;

151 they are preeminent among the people and protect
the city walls with counsels and straight judgments.
They are wise Triptolemos, Diokles,
Polyxeinos, excellent Eumolpos,
Dolichos and our own heroic father—
wives of them all manage the houses.
Not a one of them would scorn your bearing
at first glance, or keep you from their house,
no: they will welcome you—you are godlike.
Please wait while we go to our father's house
161 so we may ask our mother Metaneira
all of this straight through: she might urge you
to come to our house and not seek another.
Her only son is nursed within the well-built halls,
a son born late, prayed for, much cherished.
If you would rear him until he reaches a measure
of youth, any woman seeing you would envy you:
so high a reward would our mother give.”

She urged and the goddess nodded her head.

171 Then they proudly carried the bright jars filled with water.
Flying to their father's great house, they quickly told
their mother just what they saw and heard. Right away,
she bid them offer the woman a boundless wage.
Like deer or young heifers in spring's season
leaping through the meadow, sated with grazing,
holding up the folds of their flowing robes,
they darted down the hollow wagon trail, their hair
shimmering over their shoulders like crocus in bloom.
They came to the glorious goddess waiting
near the road and led her to their father's house.
181 Demeter followed after, her heart sorrowing,

her head veiled. A dark-blue robe
 trembled around the goddess' slender feet.
 Quickly they came to the house of high-born Keleos;
 they walked across the porch to where their mother
 sat by a column that supported the strong roof,
 holding her child, her new sprout, to her breast. They ran
 to her, but the goddess set foot on the threshold, her head
 touching the rafter, the doorway filled with divine light.

Awe, reverence, and damp fear seized Metaneira.
 191 Rising, she offered the goddess her royal seat.
 Demeter, who brings seasons, bears shining fruit,
 did not wish to sit upon the radiant throne,
 but waited silently, her lovely eyes cast down,
 until careful, wise Iambe set up a stool
 and cast over it a silvery fleece.

Then the goddess sat, holding her veil before her.
 For a long time, grieving silently, she sat on the stool,
 greeting no one with word or gesture,
 not laughing, not tasting food or drink.

201 She sat, wasting with longing for her daughter,
 until wise, careful Iambe jested with her.
 With a slew of jokes, Iambe made the divine lady
 smile, laugh and keep a gracious mood—
 Iambe who in later times also pleased her spirit.
 Metaneira gave her a cup of honey-sweet wine,
 but she shook her head, saying it was not right
 for her to drink red wine; Demeter bid her offer
 a drink of barley and water mixed with tender mint.
 She gave the *kykeon* drink to the goddess as ordered:
 211 Divine Demeter received it for the sake of her rite.

Metaneira, strong bearer of children, spoke first:

“Greetings, Lady—since I expect you are not low-born,
 but noble. Your eyes reflect the dignity
 and the grace of kings who rule with justice.
 But the gods’ gifts and griefs we humans by necessity
 must endure, for the yoke lies on our neck.
 Since you have come here, what is mine will be at hand.
 Nurse this child for me, whom the gods bestowed
 late born and unexpected; he is my dearest desire.
 221 If you would rear him until he reaches a measure
 of youth, any woman seeing you would envy you—
 so high a reward would I give you.”

Demeter, richly crowned, replied to her:

“Greetings to you too, woman, and may the gods bless you.
 Your son I will gladly embrace as you urge me;
 I will rear him, and not, I expect, as a negligent nurse,
 nor will spells attack him or herb potions.
 For I know a stronger charm than the herb-cutter;
 I know a good safeguard from painful spells.”

231 Speaking briefly, she gathered him to her fragrant breast
 with her immortal hands. And the mother rejoiced.
 Then the shining son of thoughtful Keleos,
 Demophon, whom strong-hipped Metaneira bore,
 she nursed in the great halls. He grew like a god,
 not eating grain, nor sucking [mother’s milk].
 ... [but by day, Demeter]
 anointed him with ambrosia as if god-born,
 breathing sweetly on him, holding him to her breast.
 By night she buried him in the fire’s might like a brand,
 in secret from his own parents. They were amazed
 241 how fast he sprouted up; he was like the gods.

She would have made him unaging and immortal
had not his mother Metaneira foolishly
kept watch all night from her fragrant room,
spying. She shrieked and struck her thighs,
fearing for her son, pain searing her mind.
And in her grief words flew out swiftly:

“My baby Demophon, the stranger buries you deep
in the fire, leaving me with grief and bitterness.

251 She called out weeping and the heavenly goddess heard.
Furious at her, Demeter, crowned with grace,
with immortal hands snatched from the fire
the dear child, born to the royal house unexpected,
and set him down on the floor. Her mind raging terribly,
she chided Metaneira, strong bearer of children:

“Ignorant mortals, you’ve no sense to foresee
destiny approaching whether good or bad.
You in your foolishness have been incurably harmed.
Let the gods’ oath, the Styx’s cruel water, witness:
261 I would have made your dear child immortal
and unaging forever and granted him undying honor.
Now he cannot escape death or the death spirits.
But undying honor will always be his
because he lay on my knees and slept in my arms.
In time, as the anniversary of this day returns,
the sons of Eleusis will wage war and dread battle
against one another each year on that day.
I am honored Demeter, the greatest source
of aid and joy for mortals and immortals.
271 Come, have all the people build me
a great temple with an altar below the city’s

steep walls, on the rising hill above Kallichoron.
 I myself will lay out the rites so that hereafter
 you may appease my spirit by acting lawfully.”

As she spoke, the goddess’s form and stature changed,
 sloughing off old age, and all around breathed beauty:
 a bewitching scent emanated from her fragrant robes,
 light from the goddess’s heavenly skin shone far,
 her golden hair flowed over her shoulders,
 and the solid house was filled with lightning flashes.
 281 She left the great hall. Metaneira’s knees buckled.
 Silent a long time, she did not think at all
 to pick up from the floor her only son.
 But his sisters heard his pitiful cries,
 and dashed from their richly-spread beds. One lifted
 the child in her arms, cradling him to her breast,
 another lit the fire, while another rushed on soft feet
 to rouse her mother from the fragrant room.
 Gathering him up, they bathed the struggling child
 and held him lovingly, but his spirit wasn’t soothed:
 291 far worse nurses and caretakers held him.
 All night long, quaking with fear, they prayed
 that the great goddess be gracious. When dawn appeared
 they told Keleos, whose rule stretched far,
 all that the crowned goddess Demeter had commanded.
 He then summoned the people from all around,
 ordering them to make fair-haired Demeter
 a rich temple and altar on the rising hill.
 They obeyed at once, heeded his words, and built
 the temple, which grew as the deity had decreed.
 301 When it was completed, they rested from toil
 and left to return home. But golden Demeter
 sat there, far away from all the blessed ones,

waiting, wasting away with longing for her daughter.
She made that a most dreadful and bitter year
for people on the land that feeds them, and the earth
sprouted no seed: Demeter, richly crowned, concealed it.
Oxen dragged the curved plows in vain through fields,
but the white barley fell fruitless to the earth.
All the race of speaking folk would have been destroyed
311 by the cruel famine and those in Olympos deprived
of the splendid honor of gifts and sacrifices
if Zeus had not observed and devised a plan.
First he roused goldenwinged Iris to summon
fair Demeter, so beautiful in form.
Zeus spoke and Iris obeyed the storm-cloud son
of Kronos, darting down with flying feet.
She came to the city of incense-offering Eleusis
and found Demeter darkly robed in the temple.
Iris urged her with swift words:

321 “Demeter, Father Zeus—who knows all—summons you
to join the race of gods who live forever.
Come, don’t let my words from Zeus lie idle.”

Iris pleaded, but Demeter’s spirit was not persuaded.
Then the father sent out one after another
all the blessed immortal gods. In succession
they called for her, offering many beautiful gifts,
and whatever honors she might choose among the gods.
But no one could persuade her heart or mind;
raging in spirit, she firmly spurned their words.
331 She said that never on fragrant Olympos
would she set foot, nor send up the earth’s fruit,
until she saw with her own eyes her bright-eyed daughter.
After loud-rumbling, thundering Zeus heard that,

he sent Hermes with his golden wand to Erebos
 to cajole Hades with gentle words
 that he might lead holy Persephone out of the misty
 darkness to the light among gods, so her mother
 could see with her own eyes and give up her anger.
 Hermes obeyed; at once into the earth's hidden places
 341 he plunged down quickly, leaving Olympos.
 He came upon Lord Hades in his house
 sitting in bed with his revered wife,
 still unwilling and longing for her mother. [But Demeter
 had devised a plan against the blessed gods' deeds.]
 Standing near, the mighty Slayer of Argos said:

"Black-haired Hades, Lord of the Dead,
 Zeus the father ordered me to lead noble Persephone
 out of Erebos to be among us, so that her mother
 might see her and give up her anger and dread
 351 wrath against the gods. Demeter devised a plan
 to destroy the fleeting race of earth-born humans,
 burying all seed in the earth, destroying
 the gods' honors. She rages terribly, and doesn't mingle
 with the gods: she sits far away in her fragrant temple,
 keeping to the rugged city of Eleusis."

So he explained. Hades, Lord of the Dead, smiled
 with his brows, and obeyed the command of king Zeus.
 Quickly he called for thoughtful Persephone:

"Persephone, go to your darkly robed mother,
 361 if it will keep your temper and spirit gentle.
 Don't be so much more unhappy than others.
 I won't be an unsuitable husband for you
 among the gods, Father Zeus' own brother. Here

you will rule over all who live and move,
you will have the greatest honors among immortals,
and you will punish forever those who do wrong,
who do not appease your temper with sacrifices,
enacting proper rites and offering gifts.”

371 So he said. Thoughtful Persephone rejoiced
and quickly leapt up in joy. But secretly he gave her
a honey-sweet pomegranate seed to eat,
distracting her, so she wouldn't remain
with holy, dark-robed Demeter forever.
Hades, Lord of the Many Dead, harnessed
his immortal horses to the golden chariot.
She climbed into the chariot with strong Hermes,
who took the reins and the whip in his hands,
and raced off through the great hall. Eagerly they flew
and quickly they completed the long journey.
381 No sea or river, no grassy glens
or mountain peaks held them back: high above,
the immortal horses sliced through the swift air.
Hermes drove them to Demeter, richly crowned,
who waited by her fragrant temple. Demeter saw her
and dashed like a maenad down a wooded mountain.
When Persephone [saw] her mother's [lovely eyes,]
she leapt down [from the chariot] and ran,
[flinging her arms around her mother's neck.]
[Still holding her dear daughter, Demeter at once]
391 [suspected some trick; her heart feared terribly.]
Ending [her embrace, she quickly questioned:]

“My child, you didn't [eat] any food [while you were down]
[below]? Speak out, [don't hide, so that we may both know.]
If you didn't, having come from [hateful Hades,]

you may live with me and your father,
 [Kronos' storm-cloud son,] honored by all [the gods.]
 But if you did, flying back [into earth's hidden places,]
 you will live there a third part [of each year,]
 but two seasons with me and the [other gods.]
 401 When earth sprouts with every kind of fragrant
 flower in Spring, out of the misty darkness
 you will rise again, a great marvel for gods and mortal folk.
 How did the mighty King of the Dead trick you?

Beautiful Persephone answered her in turn:

"Indeed I will tell you, mother, the whole truth.
 When Hermes, the swift runner, came to me
 from my father, son of Kronos, and the other gods
 to bring me from Erebus, so you could see me
 and give up anger and dread wrath against the gods,
 411 I leapt with joy, but secretly Kronos' other son
 put into me a pomegranate seed, honey-sweet food,
 compelling me by force to eat, most unwillingly.
 I will tell you how cunning Hades stole me away,
 bringing me from my father to the hidden places
 deep in the earth, and recount everything you ask.
 All of us were playing in a charming meadow:
 Leukippa, Phaino, Electra, Iantha,
 Melita, Iacha, Rhodeia, Kallirhoa,
 Melobosis, Tyche, blossoming Okuroa,
 421 Chryseis, Ianeira, Akasta, Admeta,
 Rhodopa, Plouto, charming Kalypso,
 Styx, Ourania, lovely Galaxaura,
 battle-rousing Athena and arrow-flinging Artemis.
 We played and picked beautiful flowers:
 delicate crocus mixed with iris and hyacinth,

rosebuds and lilies, marvelous to see,
and the narcissus, which the wide earth grew like a crocus.
When I picked it in delight, the earth gave way
from beneath, and the strong King of Many sprang out.
431 Hades dragged me most unwilling beneath the earth
in his golden chariot; I shouted and screamed aloud.
In all this, though I grieve, I tell the whole truth.”

Then all day long the two goddesses were of one mind,
greatly cheering each other's heart and soul;
as they embraced, their hearts abandoned grief.
They received and gave joys one to the other.
Hekate in her bright veil came near them
and warmly embraced holy Demeter's daughter.
From then on Hekate was her attendant and companion.

441 Loud-rumbling, thundering Zeus sent down Rhea,
the mother of darkly-robed Demeter, to bring
her daughter among the race of gods, for the honors—
whatever she might choose—that Zeus had promised.
He nodded to Rhea that the girl stay in misty darkness
for one third share of the revolving year,
but two thirds with her mother and other immortals.
The goddess Rhea obeyed the order from Zeus.
Quickly stepping down from the peaks of Olympos,
she came to the Rarian plain: life-giving udder of land
451 once fertile, now barren, it stood idle,
stripped of leaves. The land hid the white barley
through graceful Demeter's cunning. Soon,
with the flourishing Spring, the grain would grow
tall again, and in the plain, fat furrows
would be heavy with grain to be tied into sheaves.
There, Rhea first stepped down from the barren air.

Mother and daughter saw each other gladly, hearts rejoicing.
Rhea in her bright veil said to Demeter:

461 “My child, loud thundering Zeus summons you
to walk among the race of gods, for the honors—
whatever you might choose—he has promised.
He nodded to you that the girl stay in misty darkness
for one third share of the revolving year,
but two thirds with you and other immortals.
Zeus said this was to happen and nodded his head.
But come, my daughter, obey. Don’t forever rage
excessively against the storm-cloud son of Kronos.
Quickly grow life-giving fruit for humankind.”

471 Rhea urged and Demeter, richly crowned, obeyed.
Quickly she sent fruit shooting up from the fertile ground.
All the wide earth was heavy with leaves
and blossoms. Demeter revealed her sacred rites
to the kings who give justice, to Triptolemos,
horse-driving Diokles, powerful Eumolpos,
and leader Keleos, teaching her Mysteries to them all,
[to Triptolemos, Polyxeinos, and Diokles,]
sacred things not to be transgressed, asked about,
or uttered: great awe of the gods stops the voice.
481 Blest are earth-bound mortals who have seen these rites,
but the uninitiate, who has no share in them,
never has the same lot when dead in misty darkness.

After Divine Demeter laid out her rites,
they left for Olympos to join the assembled gods;
there they live with Zeus who delights in thunder,
revered and feared. Whoever Demeter and Persephone
dearly love of earth-bound mortals is greatly blest—

they send Ploutos to that person's great house
and Ploutos gives wealth to mortal folk.

491 Come, goddesses who abide in incense-offering Eleusis,
Paros, surrounded by sea, and craggy Antron—
Queen Demeter, who brings seasons, bears shining fruit,
and your most beautiful daughter Persephone—
gladly grant a welcome livelihood for my song.
But I will remember you and another song, too. ❖

* [] indicates uncertainty in the Greek original.