

THELMA SARGENT

The  
Homeric  
Hymns

A VERSE TRANSLATION

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# *The Homeric Hymns*

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by THELMA SARGENT



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THE HOMERIC HYMNS  
THE IDYLLS OF THEOCRITUS

“A very fine job—faithful to the original and eminently readable.”

—Bernard Knox, Director Emeritus, Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington

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Foreword

1. To Dionysos
2. To Demeter
- 3a. To Delian Apollo
- 3b. To Pythian Apollo
4. To Hermes
5. To Aphrodite
6. To Aphrodite
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THE HOMERIC HYMNS are a collection of anonymous poems of varying length and quality celebrating the gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon and composed for the most part around the seventh century B.C. They are in the oral tradition of bardic poetry, with the stately six-foot measures of dactylic hexameter, the meter of the great epics of Homer. The ancients had no hesitation in attributing the hymns to Homer. Thucydides (3.104), possibly because of the autobiographical reference to a blind bard from Chios in the Delian Apollo (3a.172–73), comes right out with it, quoting “Homer” on the Delian games. Pausanias, too, though he cites other islands that claim the great poet as their own, refers unequivocally to “the hymns of Homer” (9.30.12). Even in Shelley’s time, there was evidently no doubt; his translation of Hermes (4) is entitled “Homer’s Hymn to Mercury.” But today it is generally accepted that the hymns are not the work of Homer but were composed at a later date by a number of poets, whose identity has been lost in the misty past. For a while one Cynaithos of Chios (ca. 500 B.C.) was credited with the Delian Apollo on the authority of a scholiast on Pindar, but the date—a mere half century before Thucydides—is much too late. At any rate, whoever he was, the author of the Delian Apollo was a very fine poet indeed, second only to the creator of the hymn to Demeter (2).

The Delian Apollo (3a) and Aphrodite (5) are thought to be the earliest of the hymns, probably dating back to the eighth century. The Pythian Apollo (3b), like Demeter (2) and the majority of the hymns, is placed in the seventh century, Pan (19) in the fifth. Ares (8) is thought to be very late—of the Hellenistic period, or perhaps even as late as the fifth century A.D. Certainly this short hymn has a strangely modern tone and the god of war has undergone a mighty transformation.

The form of the poems is the *prooimion*, which means “prelude” or “preface.” The question is, a prelude to what? It is generally assumed that they preceded a longer recitation, but in the case of the longer narratives this seems unlikely. I wonder if they might not, instead, have been invocations such as are offered nowadays at the opening of our public ceremonies. Just as some divines are more eloquent than others and some occasions of greater importance than others, so some hymns are lengthy narratives and others barely mention the name of the god. But even the shortest ones have a salutation and a closing, like a letter or a prayer, and are therefore a self-contained artistic unit. The closing formula of twelve of the thirty-four hymns, including Demeter (2), the Pythian Apollo (3b), and Hermes (4)—the three long hymns of later date—is “But I will remember you and also another song”; three others close with “Beginning with you, I will move on to another hymn”; and the other closings vary. But whatever the wording, it is as clearly an ending as “Amen.”\*

The meter is the dactylic hexameter of the epics; that is, a six-foot line, each foot composed of a long syllable followed by two short ones (—.). But there are many variations. A syllable that is long by “nature” (containing a long vowel or a diphthong), or by “position” (containing a short vowel followed by two or more consonants), may take the place of two short syllables (— —); sometimes three short syllables are elided into two; sometimes there is a fractional pause for breath; and the last foot is restricted to two syllables, the second of which may be either long or short. The first lines of the major hymns scan as follows:

Demeter            — — / — .. / — — / — .. / — —  
Delian Apollo    — .. / — .. / — .. / — — / — .. / — .

Pythian Apollo	— .. / — .. / — — / — .. / — .. / — —
Hermes	— — / — — / — .. / — — / — .
Aphrodite	— .. / — .. / — .. / — — / — .. / — —

The rhythmic effect, over all, is not unlike that of a waltz. But although the rhythm is that of the epic the stories themselves are simple and pleasant—light entertainment for the lighter moments of life.

Not many poets have been impelled to translate these lovely poems. While both Congreve and Shelley have translated a hymn or two and a few lesser poets have translated others, the only complete and more or less faithful translation I know of † is Hugh G. Evelyn-White’s prose translation in the Loeb Classical Library series (*Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homerica* [London and Cambridge, Mass., 1914; rev. ed., 1936; 1950 printing]). The most recent, if not the only, scholarship in the field is the exhaustive study *The Homeric Hymns*, by Thomas W. Allen, William R. Halliday, and Edward E. Sikes (Oxford, 1936); Evelyn-White acknowledges his debt to the 1904 edition of Allen and Sikes and has obviously incorporated the best of their interpretations in his text and translation in the Loeb edition cited above. Interested readers may consult these books for more detailed information, but even the existing scholarship has been considerably modified by more recent work in archeology and other related fields.

In my translation I have in general followed the text of the Loeb edition, referring to that of Thomas W. Allen (*Homeri opera*, vol. 5 [Oxford, 1912; 1961 printing]) here and there along the way when questions arose, as they often did.

I have adopted a hybrid system of transliteration for the Greek names. Where the Latin form is the one familiar to the average reader of English poetry (Olympus, Phoebus, Calypso), I have used that form. Otherwise, I have used the Greek form. However, because the letter *k* has a foreign look in English, and because *c* is hard before consonants and the vowels *a*, *o*, and *u* anyway, I have used *c* in all cases except “Knossos” (but, inconsistently, “Crete”). That is the spelling familiar to twentieth-century tourists, who, though not usually schooled in the classics, do get around.

Faced with dactylic hexameter, every translator has to decide for himself how he will render it in English. Some poets settle for iambic pentameter, probably the easiest rhythm of all in our language, the meter of the sonnet and of Shakespeare’s plays, and, unless we watch out, the rhythm into which much of our speech naturally falls (“I mailed the letter on my way to work”). Some favor a longer, seven-foot line, iambic or otherwise, but despite its appearance, it invariably breaks down in reading to the jingly ballad rhythm of alternate four- and three-foot lines (“And this was odd because it was the middle of the night”). And some have opted for the six-stress line, whose rhythm is so subtle as to be almost indiscernible.

The difficulty is that narrative poetry is supposed to entertain—to tell a story—and dactylic hexameter is much too ponderous and portentous in tone for such a purpose. In our language it is unwieldy as well. Word order is important in English. The weak, unobtrusive little connectives “and,” “but,” “or,” “nor,” “for,” so essential in a sustained narrative—and inevitable in the paratactical constructions of epic poetry—have to precede the emphatic syllable that is supposed to begin the line. Greek is more fortunate; the connectives can follow the words they connect without resulting in hopeless confusion. Moreover, in an uninflected language such as ours, modifiers must come immediately before or after the word they modify. In Greek, if metrics demand, three or four lines may separate the two—again without confusion because the case endings indicate the relationship between the words of a sentence.

I have attempted a compromise—to convey the flavor of the rhythm of the Greek, but within the more comfortable framework of the five-foot line. However, it is only a general framework. When

considerations of sound or sense were more important, I have without a qualm broken my own rules. Sometimes, to relieve the monotony, I have thrown in a four-, six-, or even seven-foot line, and my “dactyls,” because of the matter of word order, are amphibrachs or anapests as often as not. The rhythmic effect is the same; the waltz merely begins on the other foot.

The poems are not in the least ambiguous or obscure. They are for the most part straightforward narrative, and I have so translated them. The apparent obscurities are in reference to things foreign to our twentieth-century culture—how a temple or a Mycenaean palace was laid out, how and why the chthonic gods were invoked, how horses were yoked to a chariot, how a Greek ship was rigged. Although cities are mentioned and perfunctorily described—high, windy, sandy, well-founded (whatever that may mean), by the sea, and so on—the background of the poems is the world of nature and the pursuits of a rural population. Wealth came from the land and the food it produced rather than from factories, offices, and the stock exchange. There was manufacture and trade, but agriculture and animal husbandry were the backbone of the economy.

Cows graze, fields are plowed, barley is sown, wheat ripens and is harvested, timber is hewn. The earth is “life-giving”; sky and sea are “barren” (the sea is also deep, broad, salty, fishy, wine-dark, and loud-roaring). Heaven is starry (even by day), groves are wooded, mountains are high and forested, and forests are shadowy. The characters—especially the goddesses—are lifelike and attractive, though they redundantly see with their eyes, speak with their mouths, take with their hands, and walk with their feet. (The translator is often hard put to it to come up with suitable English equivalents for the seemingly endless variety of beautiful polysyllabic adjectives all meaning essentially “well-dressed” and simply describing the way women of the time dressed—in long, loose gowns pinned at the shoulders with ornamental brooches and secured by a sash, or girdle, low on the hips, resulting in the flowing lines of drapery we associate with “classical” art. Hera’s “white” arms are really bare arms, like those of other fashionable women.) The repetitions are not necessarily significant as they would be in English; they are in oral poetry both a memory aid and a technical device for filling out the six-foot line. They are also less conspicuous in Greek, partly because the words are longer, sometimes accounting for most of a line, partly because the endings vary according to the function of the word in the sentence.

There is hardly a noun, common or proper, that is not modified, and the modifiers are sometimes incongruous, irrelevant, even contradictory in context. These adjectives are stock descriptions, and the poet, composing aloud as he went along and needing, say, two and a half feet to fill out his line, must have just thrown in the first of an assortment of associated words of varying length that came to mind. While in some contexts *periphrōn* and *daiphrōn* may describe Persephone very well, they do not describe the young and innocent victim in the hymn to Demeter, and *kratus Argeiphontēs*—accounting neatly for nearly three of the six feet—is hardly appropriate to the newborn Hermes. Because these incongruities occur usually at the end of a line, I think they can be explained as desperate expedients under stress, and tolerantly overlooked.

I have been as painstaking in my translation as it is possible to be. I have taken very few liberties with the text, and then only for a good reason—usually to satisfy the demands of English, which differs in structure and depends for its richness of expression on verbs rather than on adjectives and adverbs; sometimes to fill out my own line, a liberty my opposite numbers would surely understand and forgive; and sometimes to clarify what the poet intended to say but didn’t. (When I have been completely baffled, I have let the poet have his own way.)

I have translated *Argeiphontēs* as “slayer of Argos” throughout. I am aware that it could also mean something like “swift (or shining) appearing,” and that because there is no evidence that Homer had heard of the primitive legend of Io it is nowadays usually left untranslated. But since it is agreed that Homer did not write the hymns, the argument is surely irrelevant here; any one or all of the thirty-four



poets concerned could have known that Hermes was supposed to have slain the hundred-eyed monster (On the evidence presented, he was the slayer of a tortoise and two cows, at least.) Ludicrous as it may be in connection with the infant Hermes, it has the great advantage of seeming to mean something, as has Shelley's "Argicide." Hawthorne's "Quicksilver" is just about perfect—witty, appropriate, and poetic—but I have scruples about borrowing.

*Potnia* is another troublesome word. None of the English equivalents—"lady," "mistress," "queen"—have the right vowel sound or the necessary number and arrangement of syllables to precede the names of the goddesses with which it appears, all of which contain *eta* or the *alpha-iota* combination (long *a*, *e*, or *i*). If "bothersome" had the proper worshipful connotations, it might do very well; since it has not, I have substituted other inoffensive and, I hope, appropriate adjectives.

As an epithet for Demeter, the most unwarlike of goddesses, *chrysaoros* (2.4)—"with sword of gold"—was a puzzler. If it had come at the end of the line, I could have dismissed it as an aberration for the sake of the meter, but as it appeared in the middle of the line, I assumed that the poet meant what he was saying. Resorting to symbolic language, therefore, I discovered that "gold-sworded" was really "gold-bladed," a metaphor for a stalk of ripe wheat—and what could be better for the goddess of agriculture? (In connection with Apollo, "gold-bladed" is simply more euphonious, and bypasses the homophone "sordid.")

Demeter has been slandered for too long. Whether the verb is *thēke* or *hēke* (2.253)—and I think *thēke* the more likely—I read it as simply "put." If a small baby were "dashed," "cast," or "hurled" to the stone floor of a Mycenaean palace by a tall and powerful woman, he would not be alive a few lines later (2.284) to be crying piteously (he was merely cold because the fire had gone out). Psychologically, too, the more violent verbs are improbable. Demeter is a motherly goddess, grieving over her own daughter; she has cared tenderly for this child, and however angry she may be with his mother she would do nothing to harm him. In a similar episode in Hermes (4.298), the verb is *bale*. Unlike Demeter, Apollo, a bachelor, is angry with the baby himself, but even so he would probably not have "dropped" him if the ground had not been grassy or cushioned with leaf mold or pine needles. On the whole, I think the poets are better qualified than Victorian dons to know which of the two would be the more likely to "throw" a baby.

Finally, I hope that these delightful poems, so long and so unjustly neglected, will give the reader as much pleasure as they have given the translator. Very little is known about them, and nothing at all about their creators; only the poems themselves remain to us, but "beauty is its own excuse for being." One day in Delphi I drank deeply of the cold water of inspiration of the Castalian spring (simple thirst was my reason; it was a very hot day), so perhaps Apollo is responsible not only for my having undertaken this work but for the form I have chosen. May he find my labors worthy!

T. S.

*New York*  
*October, 1972*

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\* It is obvious by now that I consider "To Apollo" two hymns. In addition to what seems to me clear evidence of separate poetic mentalities of different quality at work, lines 3a.177–78 are emphatically an ending and lines 3b.179–81 as definitely a beginning. Because the hymns are frequently cited in footnotes as the source of a mythological reference, I have not altered the numbering but have merely broken Apollo into "a" (Delian) and "b" (Pythian) sections. For scholarly convenience, the numbering of the lines in the two hymns will forever remain consecutive.

† As this is being prepared for press, a very acceptable translation by Daryl Hine has just been published by Atheneum Publishers, New York. A translation by Charles Boer (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1971) has also appeared recently.



SOME there are who say that at Dracanos, Insewn,  
Some that at windy Icaros, some that at Naxos,  
Others, god-born, that by the deep-eddying river of Alpheus  
Semele, pregnant, bore you to Zeus who glories in thunder.  
Others, lord, say you were born in Thebes, but they are all liars.  
The father of men and of immortal gods gave you birth,  
Far removed from mankind and in hiding from white-armed Hera.  
A certain Nysa there is, a very high mountain, thick-wooded,  
Far off in Phoenicia, close by the rivers of Egypt,

...

“... and to her they will offer up in her temples rich gifts and many.  
As these things are three, so to you always will men  
Every three years sacrifice hecatombs full and unblemished.”

The son of Cronos thus spoke and, bending his dark brows, nodded.  
The long ambrosial mane of the king flowed down  
From his immortal head, and he caused great Olympus to tremble.  
Zeus wise in counsel, so speaking, nodded his head and ordained it.

Insewn, be gracious, you who drive women to madness;  
Beginning and ending, we bards will praise you, for in no way at all  
If we forget you can we recall sacred song.  
Thus I bid you farewell, Dionysos, Insewn,  
Semele also, your mother, by some called Thyone.

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· 2 · *To Demeter* ·

**T**HICK-HAIRED Demeter, dread goddess, I sing to begin,  
Her and her slim-ankled daughter, whom Hades abducted,  
Granted the right by far-seeing Zeus of loud thunder.  
Playing apart from bounteous gold-bladed Demeter,  
She with her friends, the full-breasted daughters of Ocean,  
Gathered the flowers that grew in the soft, grassy meadow—  
Roses and crocuses, beautiful violets, iris,  
Hyacinth, too, and a magical, glowing narcissus,  
Which, by the will of Zeus and as a boon to lord Hades,  
Gaia sent forth as bait for the flowerlike girl.  
A marvel to see was this plant for all gods and mortals:  
Out of its root grew a hundred miraculous blossoms  
Perfumed with headiest sweetness; all of broad heaven above  
And the whole earth laughed, and the salt waves of the sea.  
The girl, in astonishment, reached out with both eager hands  
To take the lovely new toy. But earth of broad highways gaped wide.  
And out of the cleft in the Nysan plain, driving  
His immortal horses upon her, rushed lord Polydegmon,  
Hades, the many-receiving, many-named son of Cronos.

He snatched her up all unwilling and carried her off  
In his chariot of gold, the girl shrieking and in a shrill voice crying out  
To her father, Zeus son of Cronos, highest and best.  
But no one of gods or of men heard her voice, nor fruit-bearing olive,  
No one but Hecate, smooth-coifed daughter of Perses,  
Ever tender and thoughtful, from deep in her cave,  
And Helios son of Hyperion, lord shining in splendor—  
They alone heard the maiden cry out to her father.  
But Zeus son of Cronos sat apart from the gods  
Far off in his temple of countless prayers and entreaties  
Receiving rich offerings from mortals, while, with his consent,  
His brother, many-named ruler and host of the dead,  
With his immortal horses carried the girl, reluctant, away.

For so long as the goddess looked upon earth and starry heaven  
And the strong-flowing sea full of fish and the light of the sun,  
And hoped still to see her dear mother and the tribes of the gods  
everlasting,  
So long did hope stifle the fear in her heart.  
But the peaks of the mountains rang with her immortal cries,  
And the deeps of the sea, and her queenly mother heard her.

Sharp pain stabbed at the heart of Demeter,  
And her hands tore at the veiling over her ambrosial hair;  
Then, tossing around her shoulders her dusky blue shawl,  
She sped like an eagle in flight over dry land and water,  
Frenzied, in search of her child. But no one was willing,  
Either of gods or of mortals, to tell her the truth,  
Nor did any prophetic bird fly to her with a true message.  
Nine days queen Deo wandered over the earth,  
Constantly searching, her hands holding blazing pine torches,  
And in her grief touched neither ambrosia nor nectar,  
Sweet to the taste, nor tumbled about in the pools.  
But with the arrival of light-bringing dawn of the tenth day,  
Hecate, holding a torch in her hand, came upon her,  
And, straightway reporting, said a word and addressed her:

“Noble Demeter, mistress of fruits in their season,  
Of bright gifts the bestower, who of the heavenly gods or of mortals  
Carried Persephone off and brought grief to your heart?  
I heard the sound of her voice but saw not with my eyes  
Who he was. Wholly true is this that I tell you so briefly.”

So Hecate spoke, but the daughter of lovely-haired Rhea  
Said not a word in reply; with their blazing pine torches  
Grasped in their hands, together they hastened away  
And went to Helios, ever on watch over gods and mankind.  
Standing before his chariot, the queen among goddesses spoke:

“Helios, pity me now, a goddess, if ever truly  
By word or by deed I have melted your heart and your soul.  
The daughter I bore, my sweet, tender offshoot, lovely to see . . .  
I heard her cry out in despair through the sky’s barren waste  
As if suffering harm, but with my eyes I saw nothing.  
You with your beams look down out of bright heaven  
Upon all things on earth and under the sea.  
Truthfully tell me if you have seen my dear child,  
And who, whether of gods or of mortals, by force  
Carried her off against her will while parted from me.”

So she spoke, and the son of Hyperion answered:  
“Daughter of lovely-haired Rhea, noble Demeter,  
You shall know. Truly I honor you greatly, and pity  
You in your sorrow over your slim-ankled daughter.  
No other is guilty among the immortals but cloud-gathering Zeus,  
Who gave the flower-fresh maiden to his own brother, Hades,  
To be his wife. Hades seized her and with his horses carried the girl,  
Bitterly crying, down to his shadowy underworld kingdom.  
Now, goddess, leave off lamenting. Nor is there need  
To nurse this terrible anger. A worthy son-in-law  
Among the immortals is Hades, ruler of many,  
Own brother to you and of the same seed; as to honor,  
It fell to his lot in the three-way division at the beginning

To be ruler over those settling in a new realm.”

So speaking, he called to his horses, wide-winged as eagles,  
And under his urging they speedily bore his swift chariot away.

Anguish more piercing and savage now entered the heart of Demeter.

Enraged by perfidious, black-clouded Zeus son of Cronos,  
She forsook the assembly of gods and lofty Olympus  
And dwelt in the cities of men and among their rich fields,  
Disguised in form a very long time. Nor did any  
Who saw her, either of men or of deeply draped women,  
Know her before she arrived at the palace of Celeos,  
Mighty of mind, who then ruled in fragrant Eleusis.  
Her heart overflowing with sorrow, she sat by the path  
Near the Well of the Maiden, where housewives came to draw water,  
In a shady spot (for an olive tree grew overhead),  
Seeming an old woman born long ago, long past childbirth  
And love gifts bestowed by flower-enwreathed Aphrodite,  
Such as are nurses to children of kings who administer right,  
And direct the household affairs of mansions with echoing chambers.

The daughters of Celeos, son of Eleusis, espied her  
As they came to the well to draw water to fill their brass pitchers  
To carry back with them to the house of their father—

Four girls like goddesses, flowers of youthful grace,  
Callidice, Cleisidice, Demo, and lovely Callithoe,  
Earliest born of them all. None of them knew her,  
For hard are the gods for mortal beings to see,

But, standing near, with winged words they politely addressed her:

“Who are you, old woman born long ago, and where do you come from?  
Why do you stay here far apart from the town,  
Never approaching our houses, where women like you of great age  
Live in their shadowy quarters, and younger women as well,  
Who surely would welcome you kindly with both word and deed.”

Thus they spoke, and the queen among goddesses answered:

“Dear children, whoever of lovely women you are,  
Greetings. I will tell you my tale; not shameful for me  
Would it be, since you ask, to tell you the truth.  
My name is Doso, a name decreed by my mother;  
From Crete, over the broad expanse of the sea,  
I came by no wish of my own. Pirates by force  
Carried me off all unwilling, for such was my fate.  
At Thoricos they in the swift ship put in to harbor,  
And there all the women, coming ashore with the men,  
Made ready a meal close by the stem cables holding our ship.  
But my heart had no craving for the delectable dinner,  
And by stealth, hastening through the dark land,  
I fled from my arrogant captors, lest they should profit  
By selling me, unbought, overseas for a price.  
Wandering about like a beggar, I came to this place.

I know not what land it is or what people live here.  
But to you may all they who have their homes on Olympus  
Grant lawful husbands, and children, whose birth is what parents desire.  
In turn, have compassion on me, dear maidens, and graciously tell me  
Whose house I should go to, of what man and wife, for whom  
I might work at such tasks as befit an elderly woman.  
I might well be employed to cradle a baby newborn  
In my bent arms, or I might look after the house,  
Or spread the master's bed in the innermost recess  
Of the well-built chamber, or teach the women their work.”

So spoke the goddess, and straightway the unmarried maiden  
Callidice, shapeliest of the daughters of Celeos, answered:

“Mother, what the gods send us we mortals must patiently suffer,  
However grievous our lot, for they are much stronger.

About what you ask, I will counsel you plainly, naming the men  
Who hold positions of power, and who stand first  
In honor among our people—the crown of our city,  
Wisely guarding us with their counsel and justice.

Triptolemos, first, known as a man of discretion,  
Diocles next, and Polyxenos, worthy Eumolpos,  
Dolichos too, and our own illustrious father,  
All of whose wives attend and manage their households.

Of them there is no one who, at the very first sight  
Of your face, would shun you and turn you away from her house in  
dishonor,

But they would all welcome you gladly—for in truth you are godlike.

Stay here, if you will, while we go to the house of our father

And repeat to our mother, deeply draped Metaneira,

All you have told us straight through. Oh, if only she might

Bid you come to our home and not seek the houses of others!

Her only son, late-born to her and long prayed for—

A most welcome child—is there being raised in our comfortable  
quarters.

If you should rear him until he arrives at the threshold

Of manhood, you would be envied by any woman who saw you,

So great a reward for his care would my mother willingly give you.”

So she spoke, and Demeter, nodding, assented.

Then joyfully, filling their shiny brass pitchers with water,

They left, and lightfooted went to their father's great house.

Quickly they spoke to their mother of what they had seen and  
been told,

And as quickly she bade them summon, untried, the woman for hire.

As deer or young heifers in springtime, their stomachs sated with fodder,

Bound through the moist meadows, so they, holding in check

The folds of their swirling, shimmering garments, ran swiftly

Down the tree-shadowed road, and their long flowing hair

Danced on their shoulders like showers of bright golden blossoms.

They came upon the proud goddess close by the path  
Where they had earlier parted, and then led the way  
To the house of their father. She walked behind them, her heart  
Heavy with sorrow. Her shawl shrouded her head,  
And her blue gown rippled about her delicate feet.

Soon they arrived at the palace of god-cherished Celeos,  
And went through the airy portico to where their mother  
Sat near a pillar upholding the thickly built roof,  
Holding her son on her lap, a tender new twig.  
The girls ran to her side, but the goddess stopped at the threshold;  
Her head reached to the crossbeam, and the doorway was filled  
with her radiance.

Reverence and awe and pale terror seized Metaneira,  
And she rose from her chair and urged her guest to be seated.  
But Demeter, mistress of fruits in their season, of bright gifts  
The bestower, cared not to sit in the richly made chair,  
But stood there in silence, her beautiful eyes cast downward,  
Till thoughtful Iambe, seeing her, placed for her comfort  
A well-carpentered stool and threw upon it a silvery fleece.  
There sat the goddess, concealing her face with her shawl.  
All too long, silently grieving, she crouched on the stool,  
Acknowledging no one either by word or by deed,  
Saddened and still, weak from not having touched food or drink,  
Ceaselessly yearning after her deeply girt daughter.  
Thoughtful Iambe, seeking then to divert her,  
Told jokes and jested and jeered and lightened the heart  
Of the holy queen and caused her to smile and to laugh.  
In later days too her jokes brightened the rites of the goddess.  
Then Metaneira offered a cup filled with honey-sweet wine,  
But Demeter declined with a backward tilt of her head;  
It was not the custom with her, she explained, to drink sweet red wine,  
And begged instead to be given a drink made of water  
And barley meal blended, with pennyroyal's delicate tang.  
Metaneira mixed the potion as she was directed,  
And offered the cup to the goddess, Deo, great queen,  
Who took it and, raising it, drank, in token of her holy rites.  
Then deeply draped Metaneira began with words to address her:  
“Greetings, my lady, for well I can see your birth is not lowly,  
But noble, for on your face can clearly be seen  
Beauty and majesty as if of kings who administer right.  
But what the gods send us we mortals must patiently suffer,  
However grievous our lot, for the yoke lies on our neck.  
Now you have come here, I will do for you all in my power.  
Bring up this child of mine, late-born to me and un hoped-for  
But greatly desired—a son granted by the immortals.  
If you would rear him until he arrives at the threshold  
Of manhood, you would be envied by any woman who saw you,



So rich a reward for his care would I gratefully give you.”

Bright-crowned Demeter, in turn addressing her, answered:

“Greetings also to you, my lady; may the gods bestow blessings upon you.

Gladly will I undertake to do as you ask  
And bring up your son. Through no negligence of his old nurse  
Shall the boy come to harm, I assure you, by either enchantment  
Or the natural dangers that cut a plant off at the root,  
For I have a powerful remedy, stronger by far than the Reaper,  
And I know a lucky charm against baneful magic and witchcraft.”

So speaking, Demeter took the child with her immortal arms  
To her sweet-smelling breast, and his mother rejoiced in her heart.  
So, in the women’s rooms of the palace, she tenderly nursed  
Demophoön, beautiful son of Celeos, mighty of mind,  
Born to well-draped Metaneira. The child grew in strength like a god,  
But neither ate food nor was suckled at breast by his mother.  
Daily the goddess, bright-crowned immortal Demeter,  
Anointed the boy with ambrosia, as if he were god-born,  
Breathing sweetly upon him as he lay in her lap,  
And by night, unknown to his parents, she buried him like a brand  
Deep in the heart of the fire. Great was their wonder  
To see how he grew, for it was like meeting the gods face to face.  
She would have made the boy free from old age and immortal  
Had not deeply draped Metaneira, on watch one night, in her folly  
Looked out from her sweet-scented chamber. She shrieked at the sight  
And struck at her thighs, being afraid for her child  
And chilled to her soul, and, weeping, spoke with winged words:

“My baby, Demophoon, the strange woman buries you deep  
In the fire and ordains for me wailing and funeral sorrows!”

Thus, lamenting, she spoke, and the queen among goddesses  
heard her.

Angered, bright-crowned Demeter reached into the fire  
For the un hoped-for son Metaneira had borne in the palace  
And with her immortal hands laid him down on the floor.  
Her heart a seethe with resentment, she spoke to well-draped Metaneira:

“Ignorant creatures are mortals, and foolishly thoughtless,  
Lacking foreknowledge of destiny, whether of good or of evil.  
And you in your folly have done irreparable damage.  
For—witness the oath of the gods—by the unsparing water of Styx  
I would have freed your son from old age for all time  
And made him immortal, besides adding undying honor.  
But now he can nowise escape from death and the fates,  
Yet will he forever have undying honor because  
He lay on my knees and slept cradled in my bent arms.  
But in the spring of his life, as the years roll around,  
The sons of Eleusis for all of their days against one another  
Will ever be joined in war and the dread din of battle.

I am Demeter, held in high honor, helpful  
To gods and to mortals alike, and the bringer of joy.

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But come, let all the people build for me a great temple,  
And below it an altar, under the towering wall of the city,  
Above Callichoros, up on the hill that juts out.

I myself will teach you my rites, that hereafter  
In their holy observance you may propitiate me.”

So speaking, the goddess resumed her own stature and aspect,  
Throwing aside her guise of old age. Beauty spread all around her,  
And from her blue gown drifted the lovely odor of incense;  
The light of the goddess’s immortal presence shone far abroad,  
And the wealth of her long golden hair lay over her shoulders,  
And the thickly built room blazed with a brightness as if of lightning.  
Then she walked out of the palace. Straightway Metaneira’s knees  
loosed in terror.

Long was she speechless, nor did she give thought to her baby,  
To lift up her only, brotherless son from the floor.  
But his sisters were roused by the sound of his miserable crying  
And jumped down from their beds well spread with rugs. One  
picked up

The child in her arms and held him close to her heart,  
Another rekindled the fire, and a third, delicate-footed,  
Ran to their mother and, raising her up, led her out of her sweet-  
scented chamber.

Then, gathering gaily around the baby, they bathed him;  
He struggled, resisting their loving embraces, nor was his heart  
soothed,

For less skilled were the handmaids and nurses who tended him now.

All night long they sought, quaking with fear,  
To placate the proud goddess, but with the appearance of light-bringing  
dawn

They reported to wide-ruling Celeos with unerring words  
All that the goddess, bright-crowned Demeter, commanded.  
He thereupon summoned his subjects far-flung to assembly,  
And urged them to build a rich temple and altar nearby,  
Up on the hill that juts out, in honor of thick-haired Demeter.  
They were soon won by his words, and obeyed, and the temple  
Was built as the goddess decreed. And the boy grew like a god.

When the builders had finished their work and ceased from their  
labor,

They went to their homes, but golden Demeter still lingered,  
Wasting, apart from all the blessed immortals,  
And yearned for her deeply girt daughter. The cruelest of years  
Did the goddess ordain for men on the nourishing earth.  
No seed sprouted in the rich soil, for bright-crowned Demeter lay  
hidden;

Oxen in vain dragged the bent plows through the fields,

And white barley was scattered without avail on the ground.  
By terrible famine she would have destroyed the whole race of men  
Endowed with speech, and deprived of their glorious gifts  
Of honor and sacrifice those having homes on Olympus,  
Had not Zeus taken heed and pondered earth's plight in his heart.  
He first sent as envoy golden-winged Iris to summon  
Thick-haired Demeter, surpassingly lovely to see.  
He spoke, and, obedient to black-clouded Zeus son of Cronos,  
Iris on her light feet swiftly traversed the distance between,  
And came to Eleusis, city fragrant with incense,  
Where she found blue-robed Demeter alone in her temple.  
In a clear voice, Iris with winged words addressed her:

“Demeter, father Zeus who knows all things forever  
Calls upon you to return to the tribes of the gods everlasting.  
Come, let not unfulfilled be my message from Zeus.”

So, pleading, she spoke, but Demeter's heart was unmoved.  
Straightway thereafter the father sent forth, one after another,  
All of the blessed gods everlasting, who, severally,  
Urged her return. They offered her many rich gifts  
And of honors among the immortals whatever she might care to  
choose.

But no one could move her or soften her stubborn heart,  
And she nursed her wrath and, unyielding, rejected their offers.  
Never, she said, would she set foot on fragrant Olympus  
Or send forth the fruits of the earth in their season  
Until she had seen with her own eyes her fair-faced young daughter.

Far-seeing Zeus of loud thunder, hearing her vow,  
To Erebus sent off the gold-wanded slayer of Argos,  
That Hermes, beguiling Hades with flattering words,  
Might lead holy Persephone out of the kingdom of shadows  
Into the light to be with the gods, and her mother,  
Beholding her daughter once more, might cease from her wrath.  
Hermes obeyed with all speed and, leaving the heights of Olympus,  
Rushed eagerly downward into the depths of the earth.  
He came upon Hades, lord of the realm, inside his palace,  
Seated upon a couch with his unwilling bride,  
A tender maiden who longed for her mother; but she, far away,  
Brooded on vengeance because of the deeds of the blessed immortals.  
The mighty slayer of Argos, standing by Hades, addressed him:

“Dark-haired lord Hades, you who rule over the dead,  
Father Zeus has bidden me come to lead forth  
Out of Erebus to be with them the noble Persephone,  
That her mother, beholding her with her eyes, may desist  
From her terrible anger and wrath toward the undying gods.  
For she intends that the feeble race of men born on earth  
Shall perish, and hides the nourishing seed underground,  
Thereby destroying the honors due the immortals.

In her terrible wrath she mingles not with the gods,  
But, brooding, stays far away in her sweet-smelling temple,  
Dwelling in the strong city of rocky Eleusis.”

So he spoke, and Hades, lord of those under the earth,  
Raised his eyebrows and smiled. He bowed to the will of Zeus,  
King, and straightway urged lovely Persephone, saying:

“Persephone, go to your mother, blue-robed Demeter,  
With gentleness in your heart and a steadfast spirit.  
And be not beyond measure despondent, for as a husband  
I am by no means unworthy among the immortals,  
Being own brother to Zeus, the Olympian father.  
Here you will rule over all those living and moving,  
And have the greatest of honors among the immortals.  
Those who offend you or slight you, who do not appease you  
With sacrifice purely offered, or render you gifts  
In accordance with fate, shall be punished for all time to come.”

So Hades spoke, and lovely Persephone, gladdened,  
Jumped up rejoicing. But he, taking thought for himself,  
Secretly gave her a sweet seed of red pomegranate to eat,  
Lest for all of her days she should stay far away  
With her honored mother, bounteous blue-robed Demeter.  
Then Hades, lord over many, led forth his immortal horses  
And yoked them together before his chariot of gold,  
And Persephone mounted the car and stood beside Hermes,  
Mighty slayer of Argos, whose hands grasped reins and whip.  
He drove away from the palace, and under his touch  
The horses, flying, swiftly covered the long trackless course.  
Neither sea nor the water of rivers nor grassy valleys  
Nor mountaintops checked in their passage the immortal steeds,  
And they cut through the thin air above as they thundered along.  
At last they arrived at the temple fragrant with incense  
Where bright-crowned Demeter was waiting, and Hermes halted  
the team.

Demeter, beholding them, ran to her daughter, just as  
A maenad, frenzied, rushes down the forested mountain,  
And at the sight of the lovely face of her mother,  
Persephone, leaping down from the chariot, eagerly ran  
And threw her arms around her neck and embraced her.  
But while yet enfolding her child in her arms, Demeter,  
Her mind at once suspicious of treachery, violently trembled,  
And left off caressing her daughter and straightway addressed her:

“Tell me, my child, did you eat any food at all down below?  
Speak out, and hide nothing from me, that we may both know.  
For if not, you are free of the loathsome dominion of Hades,  
And may dwell with me and your father, cloud-wrapped son of Cronos,  
Held in honor by all of the immortal gods everlasting.  
But if you have eaten, back you must go to the depths of the earth,

There to live for a third of the span of each year,  
But the other two seasons with me and the other immortals.  
But when the earth blooms with all kinds of sweet-smelling flowers  
In springtime, you will come up again from the kingdom  
Of shadows—a wonder indeed for gods and *for* mortal mankind.  
But tell me how he carried you off to his shadowy kingdom,  
The ruthless receiver of many. What bait did he use to ensnare you?”

Then surpassingly lovely Persephone answered her, saying:  
“Indeed I will tell you unerringly, mother, all that has happened.  
When the swift courier, Hermes, the bringer of luck,  
Came to me from the son of Cronos my father  
And the other gods of the heavens, bidden to lead me  
Out of Erebus, so that, beholding me with your eyes,  
You would cease from your immortal wrath and terrible anger,  
I jumped up rejoicing. But Hades secretly gave me  
A seed of the red pomegranate, honey-sweet food,  
And forced me, reluctant, to eat it. As for the rest—  
How, through the shrewd plan of the son of Cronos my father,  
He came and carried me down to the depths of the earth—  
I will tell you the tale from beginning to end as you ask.  
We were all playing there in the lovely green meadow—  
Leucippe, Phaeno, Electra, Ianthe, Melita,  
Iache, Rhodea, Callirhoe, Melobosis, Tyche,  
Flower-faced Ocyrhoe, Chryseis, Ianeira, Acaste,  
Admete and Rhodope, Pluto, charming Calypso,  
Styx and Urania, darling Galaxaura, Pallas,  
Rouser of battle, and Artemis, strewer of arrows—  
Playing, and with our hands picking beautiful flowers:  
Modest crocuses mingled with iris and hyacinth,  
Rosebuds and lilies and, wondrous to see, a narcissus  
That broad earth made to grow, just like a crocus.  
In delight I picked the bright blossom, but earth underneath  
Gave way, and the mighty lord, the receiver of many, rushed forth  
And carried me off all unwilling deep underground  
In his chariot of gold, and I cried out at the top of my voice.  
Deeply grieved though I am, all this that I tell you is true.”

Then all day long, with their hearts in agreement, they basked  
In each other’s presence, embracing with love and forgetful of sorrow,  
And each received joy from the other and gave joy in return.  
Then smooth-coifed Hecate came and lovingly kissed  
The holy child of Demeter, and the queen from that time  
Served as Persephone’s priestess and faithful companion.

Far-seeing Zeus of loud thunder then sent among them  
As messenger lovely-haired Rhea to summon blue-robed Demeter  
And lead her to the tribes of the gods, and he promised to give  
Of honors among the immortals whatever she chose.  
But with a nod he affirmed that her daughter must live

For a third part of the circling year in the shadowy kingdom,  
But with her mother the rest of the year, and the other immortals.

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So he spoke, and Rhea, obedient to Zeus,  
Swiftly descended from the peaks of Olympus  
And soon came to Rharos, once fertile and life-giving land,  
Now lying fallow—unfruitful, all leafless, the white barley hidden  
By the design of Demeter, delicate-ankled.  
But soon, with the coming of spring, the grain would grow tall,  
And, ripening, fill the rich furrows with tassels of gold,  
To be gathered in sheaves at the harvest and bound with straw bands.  
There Rhea alighted out of the sky's barren waste,  
And mother and daughter, seeing each other, rejoiced in their hearts.  
Then smooth-coifed Rhea spoke thus, addressing Demeter :

“Come, my child, for far-seeing Zeus of loud thunder  
Summons you to the tribes of the gods, and has promised to give  
Of honors among the immortals whatever you choose.  
But with a nod he affirms that your daughter must live  
For a third part of the circling year in the kingdom of shadows,  
But the other two seasons with you and the other immortals.  
So he said it shall be, and nodded his head.  
Now come, my child, be persuaded, and do not beyond measure  
Be angry with black-clouded Zeus son of Cronos,  
But quickly send forth the life-giving fruit for mankind.”

So she spoke, and bright-crowned Demeter obeyed,  
And at once sent forth from the fertile land the life-giving fruit;  
All of broad earth was laden with leaves and flowers.  
Going then to the kings who administer right—  
Triptolemos, horse-driving Diocles, mighty Eumolpos,  
And Celeos, prince of his people—Demeter made known  
Her holy order of service, teaching to all her most secret rites—  
To Triptolemos and to Polyxenos, Diocles also—  
Sacred matters to be in no way transgressed, inquired into,  
Or spoken about, for great awe of the gods makes mute the voice.  
Happy is he of men upon earth who has seen these wonders,  
But those uninitiate, having no part in the mysteries,  
Never share the same fate, but perish down in the shadows.

When she had thoroughly taught them, the queen among goddesses  
Went with Persephone up to Olympus among the assembly of gods,  
Where, holy and august, they dwell with Zeus who delights in loud  
thunder.

Greatly blessed of men upon earth is the mortal  
These goddesses favor with love, for soon to the hearth of his house  
They will send Plutos, who showers abundance on men who must die.

But come, great queen of Eleusis fragrant with incense,  
Sea-girdled Paros, and rock-bound Antron; glorious Deo,  
Mistress of fruits in their season, of bright gifts the bestower,  
May you and your daughter, surpassingly lovely Persephone,

Graciously grant for the sake of my song a suitable stipend.  
But I will remember you, goddess, and a new song as well.

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· 3a · *To Delian Apollo* ·

I WILL remember far-shooting Apollo, nor ever forget him  
Before whom the gods in the house of Zeus tremble whenever  
    he comes,  
And rise, all, in haste from their seats as he draws near and bends  
    his bright bow.  
Leto alone remains beside Zeus who delights in loud thunder,  
And with her own hands takes the bow from Apollo's strong shoulders  
And unstrings it, and closes the quiver, and hangs up the weapons  
On a golden peg in a pillar in the house of his father.  
Then she leads him to a chair and bids him sit down,  
And the father, to welcome his son, offers him nectar  
In a goblet of gold. Then the other gods there  
Also sit down, and lovely Leto exults  
Because she gave birth to a mighty son and a bowman.  
O blessed Leto, rejoice, for you bore children of splendor,  
Lord Apollo and Artemis, showerer of arrows,  
Her in Ortygia first, Apollo in rocky Delos,  
While you leaned against the long slope of the Cynthian hill  
Next to a palm tree that grew by the streams of Inopos.  
    How then shall I sing of you who are in every way lauded?  
For everywhere, Phoebus, the bright strains of song at you have  
    been hurled,  
Both on the calf-breeding mainland and in the islands.  
All the high hills delight you and the tallest peaks  
Of mountain ranges, and rivers that flow to the sea,  
And beaches sloping down to the ocean, and the deep harbors.  
Shall I tell of how first Leto bore you, a joy to mortals,  
Leaning against Mount Cynthos there on the rocky  
Sea-girdled island of Delos, where from all sides  
Dark billows surged landward, driven by shrill-blowing winds?  
For from this beginning you rule over all mortal men,  
As many as Crete holds within it, and those in the confines of Athens,  
The isle of Aegina, and Euboea famous for ships,  
Aegae, Eiresiae, and Peparethos washed by the sea,  
Thracian Athos, and Pelion's towering summit,  
Thracian Samos,\* the shadowy mountains of Ida,  
Scyros, Phocaea, Autocane's pinnacling hilltop,  
The well-tilled fields of Imbros, smoke-shrouded Lemnos,  
Sacred Lesbos, the home of Macar son of Aeolus,



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