

David Schwartz
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Dr. Franzen
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'Honey-Sweet': An Explication of Female Sexuality and Homoeroticism
Through Food in The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*

"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." (l. 206-209)

τῆι δὲ δέπας Μετάνειρα δίδου μελιηδέος οἴνου
πλήσασ', ἢ δ' ἀνένευσ'· οὐ γὰρ θεμιτόν οἱ ἔφασκεν
πίνειν οἶνον ἐρυθρόν, ἄνωγε δ' ἄρ' ἄλφι καὶ ὕδωρ
δοῦναι μείξασαν πέμεν γληχῶνι τερείνῃ.

"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 the revered Demeter of the dark robe." (l. 371-374)

καρπαλίμως δ' ἀνόρουσ' ὑπὸ χάρματος· αὐτὰρ ὃ γ' αὐτῆι
ῥοιῆς κόκκον ἔδωκε φαγεῖν μελιηδέα λάθρηι,
ἀμφὶ ἔνωμήσας, ἵνα μὴ μένοι ἤματα πάντα

Unlike the vast majority of phallogocentric Ancient Greek myth, women both divine and mortal occupy the foreground as autonomous subjects in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. Along with this focus, the arts and practices of pre-classical women likewise receive special attention. Of particular interest in this hymn are passages concerning the preparation and consumption of food. Each of these passages carries with it a practice of preparation regarded as inherently feminine within the scope of Ancient Greek culture, and a set of sexual effects on the female subject, who is in each instance consuming the food of the Hymn. Through an explication of these passages containing the epithet "honey-sweet", I argue that the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, through its depictions of wine and the pomegranate-seed, offers in each iteration symbols of feminine sexuality. Likewise, because these foods are linked with such an arousal of the feminine sexuality,

and because such preparation is inherently feminine, the offering of honey-sweet food and drink in each passage represents a homoerotic interaction, specifically situated within the context of Archaic Greek pederasty.

Before discussing the specific passages cited above in their relation to female sexuality and homoeroticism, it may behoove us to examine the basic structure of each mention of food preparation and consumption. In both passages, there are attributes of parallelism contained within this structure which help to form a method of analyzing these passages in parallel form. Excluding Demophon's nursing, in which vague implications of breastfeeding occur in the text, the instances outlined above are effectively the only two moments in the *Hymn's* entirety that directly describe moments in which food is prepared, presented, and consumed. The exclusivity of these two passages about food already suggest parallels in structure. Likewise, each passage concerns a period in which the consuming party is being ushered into a transition of life. In the former quote, the housewife Mateneira ushers the grieving Demeter into her *oikos* with the offering of "honey-sweet wine." In the latter, Hades resists the the departure of Persephone, who having been stolen as bride but having not yet consummated her marriage, cannot be said to be fully married into Hades' *oikos*. Also, imperative to this argument, in each instance a food is presented which is "honey-sweet." Again, besides Persephone's secondary account of the seed, these two instances are the only in the *Hymn's* entirety which use this epithet.

This parallelism offers a new way of framing each of these scenes directly parallel to the other. For each instance, then, a doubling must occur, whereby each symbol is joined with its complimentary in pairs. Where there is the honey-sweet wine presented to Demeter, the honey-sweet pomegranate presented to Persephone supplies a double. Where there is a woman offering food to a Demeter, this framing merits a search for a double in Persephone's passage which is not

apparent on its face. This parallel structure, and this search for pairs of symbols, will supply the method for the following analysis of immortality and sexuality inherent in both of these instances.

With this method in mind, the obvious parallelism of the epithet “honey-sweet” merits an in-depth analysis to both instances in which this appears, starting chronologically with its use in line 206. With this in mind, it is best to start with the first use of the epithet “honey-sweet”:

“Metaneira offered a cup filled with honey-sweet wine, / but Demeter refused it” (Foley, 12). As an epithet, “honey-sweet” has several potential meanings in the line as it is joined to “wine.” The first and most obvious meaning, perhaps deceptively obvious, is that the wine is either naturally “honey-sweet” or sweetened through the addition of honey. Again, this interpretation of “honey-sweet” can be deceptively obvious, because such a literal interpretation wouldn’t seem to merit further investigation into *why* the wine is sweet or has been sweetened, or better yet, *why* honey-sweet wine is the drink Metaneira chooses to offer.

Upon further investigation, this offering can be likened to the practice of ancient Greek marriage explicated in Foley’s interpretative essay. Foley notes “Plutarch says that Solon decreed that Attic brides should eat quinces to keep their mouth and their speech sweet (Moralia 138D and 279F)” (Foley, 108). Further, she comments that “[t]he eating of the quince by the Attic bride may also have helped to awaken her desire.” In this sense, sweet foods, such as the quince, or sweet drinks, like the wine offered to Demeter, are associated with seduction and the arousal of desire. The status of the wine as an intoxicant only strengthens this relation of the honey-sweet wine to seduction. Therefore, Metaneira’s offering of wine can operate as more than a consolation to the grieving mother, functioning as a means of seduction and of arousing the feminine sexuality.

This interpretation of the passage as a display of feminine sexuality may seem a bit contrived, as it is at this moment only corroborated by the nature of sweet foods in Archaic Greece

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and by the intoxicating nature of wine. The far more intuitive conclusion one can come to from the context of this myth is that, with Demeter being a clearly grieving houseguest, Metaneira is simply performing an act of hospitality which was considered commonplace. Likewise, the symbolism of feminine sexuality which we infer through the honey-sweet wine places the present parties, all women, in a thoroughly homoerotic situation, which only raises further questions as to why someone should interpret this as an element of both sexuality and homoeroticism over general hospitality. Here, the two terms, feminine sexuality and homoeroticism, must necessarily be reciprocal. However, there are other reasons one could view this interaction as inherently sexual, namely, through the practices associated with pederasty in Archaic Greece.

This analysis is especially necessary, as *The Hymn to Demeter* is thought to have been written circa 700-600 B.C, the same time in which pederasty began to take shape as a prevailing social practice in late Archaic Greece. One most often connects this with the more prominent male pederasty, but research conducted by classical mythologist Claude Calame shows that some uncommon examples of female homoeroticism found in Ancient Greece are likewise found in the same late Archaic era in which the *Hymn* was composed. Further, such examples of female pederasty occur predominantly in all-female choruses performing lyric poetry, a context into which the *Hymn* thoroughly fits. While the practice is not limited to these, this presentation will focus on the Spartan lyric poet Alcman and the lyric poet Sappho of Lesbos as examples of this relationship.

It may be useful then to adumbrate the basic practices of pederasty here, before explaining how they pertain in any way to Demeter and Metaneira. In both Sappho's "circle" of young girls, which is often described as an Archaic finishing school, as well as Alcman's lyrical choruses, both models of female pederasty function with the same primary goal as male pederasty— education of

the beloved young girl from a loving older woman. Likewise, in each instance, the relationship is of a transitional nature. Even while some individuals of the chorus sustain sexual relationships with their older teachers or chorus leaders, these young girls aren't deviating from the standard path of life. Rather, they are engaging in an ancient pedagogical practice as they move toward marriage to a stable sexual relationship with the husband. This is rather obvious in the lyric poetry of the aforementioned Sappho. Calame notes "Sappho's love pangs expressed in several of her poems are provoked by the absence of a single companion, whether Atthis, Anaktoria, or Gongyla" and further "...education in Sappho's circle consisted of a preparation for marriage through a series of rites, dances, and songs" (Calame, 250-252). In several instances, this absence is even attributed in Sappho's poetry to the fact that the student must leave the care of her loving Sappho and enter into marriage.

This brief summary is enough to compare these practices to the passage with Demeter and Metaneira. One must look for the offering of honey-sweet wine as an entrance to a relationship of an educational nature, between women of different ages, as a transitional stage in life. Generally, one can find each of these in this interaction. Metaneira presents the honey-sweet wine to Demeter in the context of attempting to usher her into the *oikos* as a nurse to the late-born Demophoon, which fulfills more than a standard role of servitude. The image of the nurturing crone is one often linked with pedagogy, as the crone is charged with both utilizing and sharing her deeper knowledge of motherhood and womanhood with the younger women which she serves. Likewise, this is an offering between two women of different ages, with Demeter being the older and Metaneira being the younger. Lastly, Demeter herself is engaged in a similar transition of life to the traditional maiden. Like the maiden who sits between wild virginal youth and domesticated marriage, Demeter sits between fertile motherhood and childless old age. It is Metaneira, in this instance,

who is then like Sappho, in that she is helping Demeter transition to another stage of life through her offering of honey-sweet wine.

There are several issues with this explanation, however, that must be resolved before moving forward. For one, here the age is switched backwards, in which the younger party is the engaging lover and supporter of the transition, even while the older crone is offering the pedagogical element involved in the supposedly pederastic relationship. Likewise, pederasty occurs in a maiden's transition toward marriage and motherhood, and it makes little sense for it to occur here between a mother and a crone. To resolve this one has to ask, where is the maiden in this equation. What figure can provide grounds for interpreting this scene in the light of Archaic Greek homoeroticism?

One can find the maiden, as elusive as she may seem, outside the text itself. Although Claude Calame focuses primarily on the social function of pederasty in the chorus, he too speaks of this phenomenon whereby the young girls collectively reciting the *Hymn* effectively implant themselves in the narrative through this recitation. Calame writes "...the language used by Sappho can communicate collectively and can evoke a common system of representations, so that all the pupils of the group can have the impression of being participants in the propaedeutic homoerotic bonds actually experienced by only one of them" (255). To understand how this could apply here, one must separate the notion that the young maidens, in reciting the *Hymn to Demeter*, can only identify with the maiden Koré. Demeter, as the subject and primary agent of the passage, is the clear character in which the narrator, in this case the collective chorus of young maidens, could supplant themselves. Likewise, as a group already engaged in a domestication and transition into marriage, it would make some sense for the chorus to identify with women in transition, rather than simply Koré, who represents their past history as maidens. Therefore, by recognizing the

collective chorus as a participant in the character of Demeter, Demeter in this instance is inhabited by both the crone, in her literary description, and the maiden, through the performance of the chorus. Although the tension still exists, in that Demeter is supplying the pedagogy as crone while being seduced by Metaneira as a maiden, this does further support the interpretation that the honey-sweet wine is both a symbol of feminine sexuality and a larger indicator of homoerotic interaction.

Yet, up to now, only the passage concerning Demeter has been discussed. Additional evidence can be found toward this reciprocity of sexual arousal and homoeroticism via the parallel passage in which Persephone consumes a honey-sweet pomegranate seed: “but he gave her to eat / a honey-sweet pomegranate seed...” (*Hymn to Demeter*, ll. 371-372). Before touching the nature of honey-sweet in this passage, one should comment on the explicitly sexual context of the scene. In this passage, Hades attempts to console and persuade his promised bride-to-be that her position as his wife is a good one, upon hearing that she must be returned to the side of her mother. As briefly stated above, there is no evidence at this point or any point in the text which suggests the consummation of Hades’ marriage. Thus, the context provides further merit for the interpretation of “honey-sweet” as an epithet characterizing the pomegranate as a food associated with arousal of the feminine sexuality, as it is in this context that Hades is likely attempting a last-ditch effort at securing the consummation of his divine marriage.

Once again, though, we are faced with a dilemma of interpretation in the passage vis-à-vis whether to understand the sweetened fruit as a sexual offering or another general consolation issuing forth from Greek hospitality. The symbolic nature of the pomegranate, however, paired with the possible definitions of the Greek word translated here as “seed,” heavily validate sexual intent above asexual acts of consolation. For instance, pomegranate is referenced multiple times in

the OED as a symbol of fertility, particularly associated with the goddess Persephone, following from *this* myth. The dictionary first asserts this under the subtext for the literal definition of pomegranate, stating “The pomegranate has been regarded variously as a symbol of resurrection, fertility, plenty, unity, and chastity, and was associated in classical mythology with Proserpina (Persephone) who returned to earth every spring” (OED, “Pomegranate”, s.v. A.I.1.a). The only element of symbolism outlined here which disagrees with the sexual nature of the pomegranate seed is “chastity,” which cannot be said to support either interpretation in question. Likewise, the OED adds a definition regarding the word’s extended use as an “...ornamental representation of a pomegranate, often as a symbol of abundance or fertility” (OED, “pomegranate” s.v. A.II.3), suggesting a historical preference for the pomegranate as a symbol of fertility. Therefore, the brunt of recorded connotative meanings for this word are associated with elements of abundance, fertility, unity, and resurrection, all of which fall to a greater degree under the categorial symbolism of marriage and/or its consummation. Even the word Greek word translated here for “seed” or “pomegranate-seed”, the masculine singular accusative “κόκκον”, is so caught up in sexual fertility that it is defined in the plural by the Oxford Greek-English Lexicon as simply “testicles” (“κόκκον” s.v. A.IV.2).

However, as one moves forward to apply the homoerotic and pederastic relationship explicated in Demeter’s passage, it becomes difficult to defend this claim in the same way. After all, in the context of the first passage, “honey-sweet” appears as an offering from a woman to a woman, and in the passage concerning Persephone or Koré, one finds only a maiden and Hades, an older male figure. The arousal of feminine sexuality, as proven above, is clearly not denied in this passage, but how can one make claims that, just as homoeroticism can be traced between Metaneira and Demeter, homoeroticism can be traced between a male and a female? The main

goal, then, is to explain how Hades, through his interactions with Persephone, does not fully embody maleness, but rather dons the persona of the female pederast in order to transition his bride-to-be toward marriage.

This maleness is in fact the only issue in this situation. Here, all the other problems of explicating homoeroticism between Metaneira and Demeter are resolved; Hades is much older, Persephone is truly and only a maiden, Persephone is being urged toward a transition of Marriage, and the individual explaining to her the virtues of adult life and marriage is none other than Hades, the so-called pederast in this context. One could argue that, because Hades is the candidate, this point is invalid, as Men often married much younger women in Ancient Greece. However, what Hades pursues with the pomegranate, as described above, is explicitly sexual. This then resembles a specifically sexual relationship of pederasty as much as it does a pursuit of consummation.

Further, one can gather from Persephone's war-like attributes before Hades' speech that the young maiden has undergone little to no domestication, and is not yet suitable for marriage. Therefore, the only problem with an interpretation of pederasty stems solely from Hades' nature as male.

With this established, one can move forward with why Hades' is not male in the sense of the scene. Hades dons a specific female attribute in his appropriation of food preparation¹, not unlike other gods do elsewhere to seduce women in the mythic tradition. Through presumably preparing the pomegranate, cutting it up and removing seeds, and potentially even sweetening them, Hades engages with what is understood in Ancient Greece as a feminine art. This, then, is the tipping point, in which Hades removes himself from himself as husband, and becomes a surrogate for the female pederast that Koré lacks. One should remember that it is not simply the

¹ There are other less obscure analogues to this donning of the feminine in Ancient Greek myth. See Claude Calame pg. 252-253 for a variant of the myth of Kallisto, in which Zeus cross-dresses as the goddess Artemis.

seed which 'forces' Persephone into her role as wife, but that paired with the educational speech on the virtues of marriage with Hades which comes directly before it, which is all done in an effort to 'tame' or 'domesticate' Persephone from fully maiden to a woman ready for marriage. It is only then that Persephone submits, or is forced, into marriage. This educational role of the older partner is thoroughly pederastic, as has been shown through analogue in Sappho's circle. Thus, the educational speech and the preparation of the pomegranate seed which Hades offers Persephone, is more the work of the female pederast than the husband. **By engaging in this behavior, Hades is not acting as husband nor man, but woman.**

In summary, as each iteration of honey-sweet appears in the *Hymn to Demeter*, each offers evidence of the scene as an example of implicit feminine homoeroticism. It does this through both the sexual nature of the honey-sweet fruit or wine, explicated through both its connotative and denotative meanings, as well as the actions resembling pederasty which pervade the action of offering these sexual foods. As the sexual nature of the food interacts with these actions of pederasty, each explicit trait reinforces the interpretation of the other. Likewise, as has been shown, there is a reciprocal relationship between these parallel scenes, and evidence from either scene reinforces the interpretation of the other in much the same way. However, this does not suggest that this explication on feminine sexuality and homoeroticism has been in any way exhaustive. In fact, there is still much ink to be spilled on convincingly establishing this homoerotic pederasty within the history and culture of the *Hymn* itself, which is a task of such proportions that it cannot be taken here. However, this explication can hopefully provide a convincing interpretation of feminine sexuality and homoeroticism inherent in the language *Hymn to Demeter*. And, from this research, one can hopefully undertake the larger project of which this

work is suggestive: that is, that homoeroticism likely not only pervades this myth, but the chorus performing it, and the Eleusinian Mysteries which use this as their founding mythology.

Works Cited

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