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Myth and Gender Systems

Versions, modern and ancient

In what forms do we tend to encounter classical myths today?[1] Suppose a curious American eighteen-year-old (whom we'll call Sara) is intrigued by the tale of Demeter and Persephone as she sees it re-enacted in 'The Other Side', an episode of the television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*.[2] Hades, king of the underworld, kidnaps Persephone, daughter of the goddess Demeter. The anxious mother appeals to Hercules for help, and when he refuses to interfere in a quarrel between gods Demeter unleashes storms of rain, sleet and snow to make him change his mind. Going below, he finds Persephone half in love with her captor and persuades her to leave only by describing the devastation Demeter is causing in her absence. But Hades is unwilling to let her go and Hercules must defeat him in a duel – before negotiating a compromise by which Persephone will spend six months of the year with her mother and six with Hades.

If Sara looks around for other versions of this myth, what is she likely to find?

First she remembers seeing Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* on her parents' shelf of old college texts. Here she finds a very different story from the one told in the TV show, though the plot is recognizable.[3] Hercules is nowhere to be found. The central character is Demeter, and there is a long subplot about her failed attempt to adopt a human baby – a little boy. Persephone is a very reluctant bride, and the lengthy negotiations needed to end the famine on earth are carried on between Zeus and Demeter, with many divine intermediaries. Demeter is finally persuaded to accept the compromise by 'Rhea, the oldest of the gods', who is identified as Zeus'

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mother. The story is framed by an essay in which Hamilton explains that Demeter and Dionysus were 'altogether different' from the rest of the Greek gods in the degree of their concern for human beings. Demeter in particular was 'always kind'; 'she was sorry for the desolation she had brought about' and compensated humanity by teaching them to sow grain and celebrate her secret rites.

At the local public library, Sara finds *Bulfinch's Mythology: The Age of Fable*.[4] All the names of the main characters have changed (to Latin, as Bulfinch explains in his introduction), and the story has some curious new details: Hades (now called Pluto) falls in love with Persephone (now Proserpine) when he is struck by one of Cupid's arrows. The family whose baby Demeter/Ceres adopts is poor, and the father plays a more prominent role in the story. Two water nymphs, Cyane and Arethusa, give Ceres the information she got from the Sun (Greek *Helios*) in Hamilton's version; when she learns where her daughter is, she goes straight to Zeus/Jupiter and 'implores' him to intervene.

At a used-book sale, Sara picks up a paperback from the 1960s called *The Greek Gods* by Evslin, Evslin, and Hoopes.[5] In the chapter on Demeter, she finds yet another version of the story, in which Persephone is described as 'a flower child' whose job is to invent and name new kinds of flowers. The relationship between Hades and Persephone is straight out of a Harlequin or Mills and Boon romance:

> Although she never forgot how he had frightened her ... , she admired the lofty set of his black-robed figure, the majestic shoulders, the great impatient hands, and his gloomy black eyes. But she knew that part of her power over him was disdain, and so kept flouting and abusing him ... (27)

It is not Hades who tempts her to eat the pomegranate seeds, but a strange boy, newly arrived in the underworld after being turned into a lizard by Demeter for laughing at her in her grief.

Sara's older brother, visiting for the holidays, shows her a graphic novel (for 'mature readers') he acquired in high school, in which the story of Demeter and Persephone is set in fifth-century Athens with

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a cast of supporting characters led by the philosopher Epicurus and including Plato, Aristotle, and a bratty little boy named Alexander (someday to be known as 'the Great').[6] Here Demeter is a gigantic, voluptuous nude towering over the human characters; even her daughter is afraid of her, and has allowed 'Hadespoo' to stage the abduction to get around 'Mummy's' objections to their marriage. The role of negotiator is taken by Epicurus, who secretly advises Persephone to eat the seeds so Demeter will be forced to compromise. In fact, the whole episode of the 'visit to Hades' is framed by Epicurus' attempts to make sense of a world that seems intractable to his philosophical ideals of logic and moderation.

Sara's little niece comes to visit her, bringing a children's version of the myth called *The Pomegranate Seeds* by Laura Geringer.[7] The story is close to that in the Evslin version, but with a tone more appropriate to a children's book. An interesting 'Author's Note' informs the reader that this version 'is inspired by Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Pomegranate Seeds," published in *Tanglewood Tales* in 1853, which emphasizes the coming-of-age theme and underplays Persephone's kidnapping'. The author adds, 'My Persephone is a more modern and outspoken girl than Hawthorne's. And like a present-day working mother, Demeter, though conflicted about leaving her daughter, must tend to her job.' Sara finds Hawthorne's version at the library (in a 1968 edition)[8] and, given its age, is struck more by the similarities than by the differences between it and Geringer's. In neither does there seem to be anything sexual about the relationship between Hades and Persephone; he is her lonely old uncle, who just wants 'a merry little maid' ('a lively little girl' in Geringer) to keep him company in his gloomy kingdom. On her side, Persephone develops an affection for him that makes her willing to accept her six months in the underworld (reduced to three in Geringer). Zeus has disappeared from the story, so that there is neither confrontation nor negotiation between him and Demeter.

Starting college in the fall, Sara enrolls in a mythology course and decides to ask her teacher for help in sorting out all these versions. The teacher refers her to recent translations of two ancient texts: the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the second half of Book 5 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.[9] In these two very different works, Sara recognizes

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most, but not all, of the details that appear in various combinations in the versions she had found on her own. The ancient works, however – one Greek and the other Latin – are themselves separated by at least six hundred years, a far greater gap even than that between Hawthorne and Geringer. Sara is surprised to find that in the *Homeric Hymn* – by far the oldest available version of this myth – Demeter is portrayed as more powerful than in most subsequent versions. Motivated by anger as much as by grief, she is capable of destroying the human race and wiping out the privileges of the gods by 'hiding' the seed and not letting it grow. Far from appealing to Zeus for help, she ignores a whole string of his emissaries – who offer her gifts and 'whatever honours she would choose among the immortals' – until he himself capitulates and sends the messenger god Hermes to bring back Persephone. The real negotiator in this version, though, is the goddess Rhea, who by the logic of the story seems to be chosen because she is *Demeter's* mother (though she is Zeus' as well): she calls Demeter 'child', and their meeting is a joyful one like that of Demeter and Persephone (lines 458-60). While the goddesses must accept the permanence of Persephone's marriage and Hades is repeatedly described as a worthy match for her, there is no attempt to justify his abduction of her or to portray any emotional ties between husband and wife.

In Ovid's version, despite the fact that Dis (the Roman name for Hades – Pluto is actually another Greek name) is smitten with desire for Proserpina, there is still no mutual affection, and the theme of rape is reinforced by a long digression in which the nymph Arethusa describes her own attempted rape by the river Alpheus. Arethusa's ultimate escape, like that of the better-known Daphne when pursued by Apollo, requires her transformation into something non-human – in her case, a spring. In fact, no fewer than seven such transformations are described or alluded to in this retelling of the myth, which is subordinated to the larger themes and narrative framework of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Not only does Ceres change the boy who laughs at her into a lizard, but the underworld spirit who reports that Proserpina has eaten the pomegranate seeds is turned into a screech-owl by Proserpina herself. The story as a whole is presented as the Muse Calliope's entry in a singing contest,

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one of those fatal contests in which mortals dare to rival gods. Predictably, the mortals, daughters of Pierus, lose and are changed to magpies for their arrogance. While Ovid clearly relishes these transformations as displays of his own virtuosic performance as a poet, he also explores what we would call their psychological dimension. Thus he dwells on the appropriateness of the new form a character assumes, and on the trauma of being 'taken away from oneself' (*sibi ablatus*, line 546). It is not surprising, given this latter focus, that so many of the metamorphoses should result from rapes or attempted rapes.

I have drawn out this series of examples to underline a number of points about the myths in both their ancient and modern versions. The most obvious of these points – that the myths have continued to attract tellers and audiences for close to three thousand years – is also in a way the most puzzling, since it should be clear from my brief survey that the stories change radically from one version to the next, even when the versions are contemporary with one another. Retellers ancient and modern have freely altered the motives of the characters, the sequence of narrative events, and the point(s) of view from which they are told. What is more, these narrative building blocks, themselves so variable, have been used to evoke a vast range of themes: the love of mother and daughter, to be sure, but also the daughter's fear of the mother and manipulation of the husband, the husband's desire for a wife, even the poet's (and humorist's) virtuosity and the philosopher's desire to make sense of 'illogical' reality. What, then, is the myth of Demeter and Persephone 'about'? The answer must be that it has an enormous range of potential meanings, only some of which have yet been tapped.

If a myth is so variable, does it make sense even to call it 'a' myth? Does a myth exist as something more than, or other than, a series of discrete texts and images? Ordinary language usage would suggest that it does: we speak routinely of 'the myth of Demeter and Persephone'. All that *survives* from the ancient world is a congeries of texts and visual images, some datable, some not. But there must have been innumerable versions of these same stories – oral performances and informal retellings as well as texts and works of art – that have been lost. And most classical myths continued to be

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retold long after the ancient societies had passed away; many of them, as the children's books and television series mentioned above make clear, are still being retold today. Should these facts have any influence on the way we interpret the myths?

Most of the lost versions are irrevocably lost, though a few may yet be retrieved from the earth by archaeologists. But the fact that they existed is not a negligible one. For a myth is not just any fiction. To become a myth, a story must have been retold often enough to become familiar to many, if not most, members of a community over several generations; and as a result, it carries a certain authority – if not that of religious tradition, at least that of survival and of peer acceptance. It cannot be truly marginal and still be considered a myth.

At the same time, the great differences among surviving versions of certain classical myths make us aware that poets and artists had great license to reimagine and reinterpret them. The religions of Greece and Rome resembled each other, and differed from the monotheistic faiths of more recent times, in emphasizing practice over belief. What mattered was what one did in honour of the gods, not what one believed about them. As long as the traditional festivals were observed and the prescribed offerings made in the prescribed ways, it was thought that the gods would be satisfied. So there was no formal canon of scripture, no catechism, no schools of theology. To some extent, the differences among mythic variants are due to changes in the Greek and Roman cultures over time; this is clear when we compare Aeschylus' view of Prometheus with Hesiod's, or Seneca's Medea with Euripides'. And some differences clearly reflect the attitudes of individual artists, as we can see by observing the distinctive 'Ovidian' or 'Senecan' or 'Euripidean' features of those authors' retellings.

What difference does it make that nearly all surviving ancient versions of the myths are by male authors? Undeniably a male poet is capable of portraying vivid female characters, or making one the protagonist of a work, or putting words in her mouth that express attitudes different from those the male characters say she should have. (Think of Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, or of almost any Euripidean heroine.) From the literature of subsequent eras, we

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know that women and men can portray one another with realism and sensitivity. When virtually *all* our testimony comes from men, however, we must ask if we are missing something important – especially when a culture, like that of ancient Greece, kept men and women apart for many activities. One thing we may be missing, to judge from cross-cultural comparisons, is a body of folklore, including versions of myths, produced by women for women. That such tales exist in many cultures has been realized only since women began doing anthropological fieldwork: they gained access to women's traditions that were closed to their male counterparts, and even to men within the culture under study. (See Chapter 2 for an example from India.) The meagre surviving fragments of Greek women's poetry, especially that of Sappho, give us tantalizing glimpses of this kind of 'women's world'. Unfortunately for my purposes, most of the little writing by women that survives is lyric rather than narrative poetry, with few clear references to mythic material. In the late twentieth century, women writers have self-consciously sought to remedy this gap in the classical tradition by retelling the myths from the points of view of the female characters.[10] The range of genres and styles in which these retellings have appeared – from the poetry of Margaret Atwood and Carol Ann Duffy to the stories of Marina Warner, the novels of Marion Zimmer Bradley, and the television serial *Xena, Warrior Princess* – suggests that the effort to reclaim a distinctive 'women's classical tradition' appeals to many women and at least some men at the turn of the millennium.[11]

An interesting case can be made for the possibility that the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, or the poem on which it is based, may be female-authored. Ann Suter believes that the *Hymn* consists of two parts: a 'core story' of Persephone's abduction, which can be read as a psychological 'coming of age narrative', and an 'Olympian frame' asserting that the abduction was arranged between Zeus and Hades.[12] In Suter's reading, Persephone's interest in the narcissus is symbolic of her readiness for, and interest in, adult sexuality; it is her reaching to pick it that precipitates the action of the core story. To Demeter, she describes her eating of the pomegranate seed as forced on her, but this can be seen as 'a prototypical young girl's story to

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her mother', edited to placate Demeter. While the Olympian frame is clearly 'in the male voice', affirming patriarchal control of events,

> the core story just as clearly is in the female voice: women are the active subjects as well as objects; women control events; relationships are adjusted on the basis of understanding, accommodation, sharing, rather than hierarchization; the predominant motivation for action is love, not power; the matrilineal line is emphasized.

Suter argues that the *Hymn* was composed as an *aition* (account of origin) not only of the Eleusinian Mysteries but of the women's festival called the Thesmophoria, where it may have been performed 'by a woman, for women'.

Suter's balanced discussion acknowledges that women can speak in 'the male voice', adopting, or at least mouthing, patriarchal values; and she makes the important point that 'male' or 'female', as descriptions of the 'voice' of a poem, should not be equated with the biological sex of the author. We know that Greek women composed lyric poetry of the highest quality and that some composed in hexameters, the metre of epic; is it impossible that some of them should have mastered the compositional technique of 'Homeric' verse, in which the *Hymn to Demeter* was cast? We tend to assume that women were barred from the traditional apprenticeship by which male bards learned their art, but a remarkable instance of women performing oral epic has recently been reported from nineteenth and twentieth century Dalmatia.[13] Very little of their material has yet been published. Given the short time that scholarship has concerned itself with women's traditions, it is too early to foreclose the possibilities of women's participation in art forms we tend to think of as masculine.

Gender systems

I chose to begin with the myth of Demeter because the variety of existing versions makes especially clear the complex relationships

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between myths and systems of gender relationships in both the ancient and the modern world. Hard as we may try, we can never completely divorce ourselves from the nexus of gendered meanings and practices in our own world, which for convenience I will call our 'gender system'.[14] In their modern, adapted versions, the classical myths are 'naturalized' into our gender system – for instance, by making Hades and Persephone 'fall in love' with each other; in their ancient versions, the myths reflect the ancient systems in and for which they were produced – for instance, by emphasizing Zeus' attempt to arrange a marriage for his daughter. There are enough similarities between the ancient and modern systems to make the ancient versions intelligible to us, but many of their details are puzzling until we place them back into their ancient contexts.

Let me begin by outlining some of the most salient features of the Greek and Roman gender systems and noting both similarities and differences between these systems and our own. In such a survey oversimplification is inevitable, since every gender system has many components whose interrelationships evolve over time. Keep in mind, then, that these are only the broad outlines; some of the nuances and exceptions will be filled in by later chapters.[15] Because this book is concerned with myths, I omit other systems of thought such as medicine and philosophy, which were undeniable elements of these gender systems but which have complexities of their own requiring fuller treatment than I can give them here. Myth has an especially complex relationship to religion; the gods, to cite only one difficulty, could be understood very differently and could play very different roles in myth and in cult.

I illustrate the survey by relating details of the gender systems to the versions of the Demeter myth I have just outlined. Some essential elements of the gender systems have no parallels in this myth but are included in the survey because of their intrinsic importance. Since the gods of classical myth were humans writ large, sometimes subject to the limitations of human existence and sometimes escaping these limits in spectacular ways,[16] their stories illustrate the cultures that produced them by contrast as well as by direct reflection. This survey is an introduction, then, to the dialectical

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relationship between myths and reality that makes myths 'good to think with'.

Our view of the Greek gender system has long been skewed by the fact that a disproportionate amount of the surviving evidence comes from the city of Athens in the 'classical' era, i.e. the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Paradoxically, the first Greek democracy put more limitations on its women's activities than did some other city-states, to judge by the fragmentary evidence that survives from elsewhere. Yet throughout Greece in the so-called 'archaic' and 'classical' periods, most women were economically and legally dependent on men, who held all political authority and handled most economic transactions. (Sparta, where women could inherit property, may have been an exception to the latter rule.) This situation is clearly reflected in the *Hymn to Demeter*, a product of the early 'archaic' period (*c.* 600 BCE): the women of Eleusis must turn to their men to satisfy Demeter's demand that a temple be built in her honour. In legal transactions, a woman was never treated as an adult: throughout her life she needed a male 'master' (*kyrios,* often translated 'guardian'), usually a father, husband, or son, to act on her behalf. Demeter is clearly exempt from this requirement because she is a goddess, and she is outraged when Zeus – who is the father of her child, but not her husband – behaves as though he alone had authority over Persephone. Although the divine hierarchy included elements of gender hierarchy, the most powerful goddesses were thought to escape some of its provisions. At her marriage, a woman received from her father a dowry that was intended for her support and that had to be returned with her if she were divorced. Daughters were sometimes portrayed as liabilities because they would inevitably leave their birth families, taking valuable property with them. The *Hymn to Demeter* omits the mundane details of the dowry[17] but suggests that daughters may have been more highly valued – and their departure at marriage more keenly regretted – by mothers than by fathers.

Girls were married in their early teens to men who were normally at least ten years older than they. This is reflected in the age difference between Persephone and Hades, who is her uncle. (Nieces were married to paternal uncles with some frequency, since this

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kept their dowries in the family.) The marriage ceremony, which required no verbal consent from the bride, consisted principally of a procession from the bride's house to the groom's as she was transferred from her family to his. Some pictures on Greek wedding vases, in which bride and groom ride in a chariot or the groom leads the bride by the wrist while her mother carries a torch in the procession, have been interpreted as evoking details of Persephone's abduction and Demeter's torchlight search for her (most weddings took place at night).[18] Girls who died before marriage were referred to as 'brides of Hades'. Although women were raised to expect this radical transition in their lives, it must have been difficult and even traumatic for some, who may have experienced it as a rape – especially if the groom were unknown to them, as was often the case. Even the fact that eating seeds binds Persephone to Hades had an echo in the Greek wedding, since the bride ate a quince or seedcake in her new home, presumably to symbolize the prospect of her fertility.

Virtually all people, men and women, were married for some part of their lives, and were expected to produce children, especially sons to inherit the father's property and perpetuate the 'family cult', i.e. the offerings made to dead members of the (father's) family. Because the gods are immortal they do not need to replace themselves by reproduction, yet because they are anthropomorphic they do so, with sometimes problematic consequences (see Chapter 2). Hades and Persephone are unique among divine couples in failing to produce a child (though in some unusual versions of the myth they do). A puzzling detail of the *Hymn* is Demeter's attempt to adopt a human boy. On one level he is clearly a replacement for her lost daughter, but the difference of sex suggests that a son, who cannot be taken away and who will enjoy the privileges of masculinity, is a 'safe' replacement, even a potential champion for Demeter in her opposition to Zeus.

Most forms of work were gender-specific, with outdoor tasks – most agricultural work, commerce, warfare, and government – assigned to males and indoor tasks – spinning, weaving, food preparation and storage, the care of children and the sick – to females. In households that could afford slaves, much of the work

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was done by them and supervised by the mistress of the house – the wife or mother of the owner. For slaves too, work was largely gender-specific. The women of a household, slave and free, thus spent much of their time together and apart from the men; husbands and wives did not even dine together, at least when guests were present. This gender segregation is reflected throughout the *Hymn*: Persephone is gathering flowers with other goddesses when she is abducted; in her mortal disguise, Demeter has contact only with the female members of the household she visits; and while Zeus employs the male Hermes as messenger to Hades, he sends the goddess Iris and later Demeter's (and his own) mother Rhea as envoys to Demeter.

Religious activities, like work, were often, though not always, segregated by gender. Although male and female deities were worshipped by both sexes, a large number of cults and cult activities were gender-specific. The Eleusinian Mysteries, whose foundation is described at the end of the *Hymn*, were open to women and men alike and presided over by priests and priestesses who were thought to be descendants of the Eleusinian families named in the *Hymn*. Other rites of Demeter, however, including the Thesmophoria, which have also been linked to the *Hymn*, were celebrated by women only. At the Thesmophoria the fertility of grain and the fertility of women were symbolically linked. The metaphor of woman as the 'ground' in which the man's seed is 'planted' became almost a cliché of Greek poetry – though the actual extent of the woman's contribution to her child's heredity was a subject of constant debate in medicine and philosophy.

As might be expected, there are important aspects of the gender system that are not reflected in the *Hymn to Demeter*. Since these are reflected in other myths, I briefly sketch them here. A double standard of sexual conduct, which permitted some kinds of extramarital sex to men but not to women, led to the division of free women into two basic classes, those who were 'respectable', i.e., marriageable, and those who were not. Slaves, both women and men, were *ipso facto* ineligible for legal marriage and sexually available to their masters. (The existence of slavery is at least alluded to in the *Hymn* when Demeter tells Metaneira's daughters

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that she has escaped from pirates who wanted to sell her.) Sexual relations between males were permitted and perhaps customary in certain highly specific circumstances – between an older *erastês* ('lover') and a pubescent *erômenos* ('beloved') to whom he acted as both lover and mentor for a limited time. Analogous relationships between women are suggested by some lyric poetry[19] and in Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* (18).

The Roman gender system was similar to the Greek in many ways but had its own distinctive features. On the one hand, the power of the father over his family (*patria potestas*) was even greater, at least in theory: not even a son achieved legal adulthood or the right to own property in his own name until he was 'emancipated' by the death of his father. All children bore the father's name (which was also the family name, the *nomen*), in a masculine form for boys and a feminine form for girls. Yet boys were given individual first names (*praenomina*), while girls were not.

On the other hand, Roman women – at least those of the late Republic and early Empire, when most of the mythic texts I will discuss were written – enjoyed greater social freedom than was the norm for Athenian women. While most types of work were still gender-specific and therefore segregated, women spent more time socializing with the men of their own households and did not risk a reputation for unchastity by dining with or speaking to men who were not their relatives. As a result, they could and did lobby for political programmes – usually, to be sure, those of their husbands or brothers. On occasion, they even staged public demonstrations to support or oppose specific legislation. The unofficial power of a few individual women – members of the imperial family – was greatly enhanced by the change in the Roman system of government from republic to autocracy. Even the republic, however, was an aristocratic system in which women were valued as the transmitters of bloodlines. It has been argued that Roman fathers saw daughters, like sons, as perpetuating their personal traits and abilities, and that women so valued were empowered to exercise these abilities themselves – sometimes even in the public sphere.[20]

Some of these distinctive features of the Roman system may be reflected in the version of the Demeter myth told by Ovid. His Ceres

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still turns to other females for help initially, but upon learning her daughter's fate she confronts Jupiter directly and appeals to his paternal feelings: 'If you have no regard for the mother, at least let the daughter touch her father's heart' (5.515-16).[21] Surprisingly, the abduction is not arranged between Jupiter and Dis (Pluto) but instigated by Cupid at the command of his mother Venus. Her motive is to extend her own power (*imperium*) as goddess of desire by bringing Dis' kingdom under her yoke and preventing Proserpina from remaining a virgin like Minerva/Athena and Diana/Artemis. Her language is clearly meant to suggest Roman imperial ambitions, but these are presented as a female's bid for power over her peers within the ruling elite.

The Romans recognized two forms of marriage that had different implications for the woman involved. If she was married 'with *manus*' (*cum manu*), her husband became her legal guardian and she became a member of his family. If married 'without *manus*' (*sine manu*), however, she remained a member of her birth family and one of its members – such as her father or brother – served as her guardian. Since Roman women could inherit property, the choice of a form of marriage dictated whose heirs they would be, their husband's or their father's. A father who retained his authority over a married daughter might seek to dissolve her marriage and arrange a new one to suit his own political or economic purposes. Yet a woman whose guardian was not her husband also had more leverage in disputes with the husband and could obtain a divorce more easily. Divorce among the elite became increasingly common in the late republic for both these reasons: fathers using it to shift political alliances and wives to withdraw from marriages in which they were unhappy. Conservative orators railed against the spread of marriage 'without *manus*' on the grounds that it fostered divorce and moral laxity – which, by implication, resulted when women were allowed greater independence from their husbands' control. In practice, the guardian's power was also eroded over time until in the case of elite women, at least, it became largely *pro forma*.

Although none of this background surfaces in Ovid's version, it provides a context in which many of his details make sense. Ceres addresses Jupiter in language that would suit a divorced wife

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addressing her former husband: 'Let not your care for [Proserpina] be less because I am her mother' (5.516-17). Yet she sounds self-assured in her position and anything but apologetic. In urging him to dissolve Proserpina's marriage, she argues that Dis is a 'robber' and thus morally unfit – the only grounds on which a Roman woman could legally reject the groom her father proposed. Jupiter reminds Ceres that Dis is his brother, yet he is willing to let her have her way; the outcome is determined by 'the fates', who rule that because she has eaten in the underworld Proserpina must return to it periodically.

Another feature of Ovid's version is the emphasis on rape as seen from the woman's perspective. The water nymph Cyane tries to block Dis' chariot on the grounds that a woman should be 'wooed' (or 'asked'), not raped. When Dis evades her, she literally dissolves in tears so that she cannot speak when Ceres comes in search of her daughter. The nymph Arethusa, who does give her the information, was herself the victim of attempted rape, which she avoided only by praying to the virgin goddess Diana, who transformed her into a spring. Like many of the rapes described by Ovid this one seems designed to appeal to at least two audiences: the description of the naked, beautiful, vulnerable nymph can be read as titillating to a voyeuristic male audience, while her description of her own terror and her empathy with the fear of Proserpina (5.506) emphasize the woman's side of the story.

It is sometimes assumed that 'Roman mythology' is merely Greek mythology with Roman names. This is a serious misunderstanding. Although the Romans did borrow great numbers of Greek myths, they adapted them to their own cultural situation in ways both obvious and subtle. They also had stories of their own about the early history of Rome that – whatever their connection to 'history' as we define it – served many of the functions of myth. As in the Greek stories about mortal women, there is a tendency to classify women characters as good or bad on the basis of their loyalty or disloyalty to male kin. Yet some of the women in Roman legend are exemplary for their public, if not political, roles: the Sabine women venture onto the battlefield to make peace between their fathers and their hus-

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bands, while the mother of Coriolanus puts loyalty to Rome above loyalty to her son and is able to dissuade him from attacking his city.

At first glance, the contrasts between these gender systems and our own seem overwhelming, especially since the recent changes brought about by women's movements for civil and social equity. At least in law, women in Western Europe and North America have full civil rights and can serve in any governmental office. Girls and boys usually attend the same schools and study the same subjects. Women own and manage their own property and have gained access to most forms of employment, including the professions that require advanced education. As a result, women need not be financially dependent on men. Marriage is a personal choice for both parties; divorce and cohabitation without marriage are common and socially acceptable. It is even acceptable for women living alone to bear or adopt children, and long-term unions between two men or two women are gaining social acceptability if not legal recognition. In marriage and other long-term sexual relationships there is an ideal of friendship and mutual desire between the partners. Thus all the modern retellings of the Demeter myth include some mutual attachment between Hades and Persephone, either predating the abduction or developing gradually after it.

But there are discrepancies between legal possibilities and the actual state of affairs: thus in the United States in the year 2000, although women had had the right to vote since 1920, only one woman in the history of the country had served as Attorney General, one as Secretary of State, and a total of 22 as members of presidential cabinets (4.5% of 487). Two had served as Supreme Court justices; none had been elected President or Vice-President, and only one had ever been nominated for Vice-President by a major political party. Nine out of 100 Senators and 56 of 435 Representatives in the Congress were women.[22] Women are still disproportionately employed in lower-wage jobs and earn on average 76 cents for every dollar earned by men. Thus within heterosexual couples the woman is likely to be earning less than the man and to be financially dependent on him to some extent. Women have made rapid strides in the professions, especially medicine and law, but administrators at the highest levels are disproportionately

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male. So the gender hierarchy that prevailed in the ancient cultures and that was reflected in their myths is still largely intact. It makes sense to a modern audience that Demeter and Persephone have less authority than the male gods and must use subversive tactics such as a strike or passive resistance to get their way. Paradoxically, while many modern versions omit Zeus, some of them introduce a new male character – Hercules or Epicurus, in the versions described above – to resolve the crisis, either by defeating Hades in a duel or by negotiating a 'settlement' between Demeter and Hades.

Another element of the ancient gender systems that survives today is the expectation that a woman will take primary responsibility for the running of a household and that a mother of children will provide or arrange for most of their care. If, as in the United States, there is no governmental support for day care, women who work outside the home must cobble together private solutions, most of which involve hiring other women as caregivers. Given this situation, it is surprising that few modern versions of the Demeter myth even include the episode in which the disguised Demeter is hired to care for a human baby. This may simply be because most modern versions are based on Ovid's, which omits the episode. Yet to include it would be to raise in a more acute form the issue of women's ambivalence and guilt about leaving their children with other women. The modern versions may be expressing this guilt more tacitly by devoting more space than the ancient ones to the emotional connection between mother and daughter. Demeter's mothering role is even explicitly linked to her responsibility for the growth of grain and, by extension, her 'motherly' care for all humanity. Modern interpreters feel obliged to explain that she was very sorry for the suffering she caused the human race and that she made it up to them by teaching them the Mysteries and the principles of agriculture. Sometimes the sterility of the earth during Persephone's absence is described as a sympathetic reaction to Demeter's grief; in Geraldine McCaughrean's version, 'the trees wept with her, shedding their leaves'.[23]

Some modern versions also portray Demeter as anxious about her daughter even before the abduction because she is obliged to leave her alone. This clearly reflects the working mother's concern for the

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safety of her children, as well as the heightened awareness of sexual abuse and rape as real and widespread dangers. Violence against women and even sexual harrassment are illegal in America at the turn of the century but both are still epidemic. The desire to shelter children from this reality may account for the desexualized versions of the myth designed for children, in which Hades plays the lonely old uncle who needs the company of his little niece to cheer him up.

As in the ancient cultures, women today are divided by class and privilege, and the divisions often fall along ethnic lines (as in Greece and Rome most slaves were prisoners of war or their descendants). Now as then, the stories that receive widest distribution tend to focus on characters who are at least moderately privileged, and to be told from their point of view. Yet even in ancient Greece and Rome the perspectives of lower-class characters were sometimes included.[24] One not uncommon type of story featured a god who assumed a human – even a lower-class – disguise to test the hospitality of mortals. Some interpreters of the Demeter story have argued that her special concern for mortals, expressed in her gift of the Mysteries that mitigated the fear of death, should be linked to her experience of the human condition as grieving mother and as servant/nursemaid in a human household.[25] Of course, a temporary identification with a person of lower status is not likely to unsettle one's relation to the social hierarchy in any profound way, and may even reinforce it by suggesting that charity to the 'unfortunate' is all that is required. Yet the story of Demeter also suggests a commensurability of female experience across class divisions, including the great divide between the 'class' of gods and all classes of mortals.

To me, the most striking effect of comparing a range of ancient and modern versions of the Demeter myth is the revelation that the oldest surviving version, that of the *Homeric Hymn*, gives Demeter the strongest role in the story's outcome and makes her anger as important as her grief. Although her resistance to Zeus may be passive by comparison to her quarrel with him in Ovid, she demonstrates in a spectacular way that he cannot do without her and that her approval should therefore be sought in decisions that affect her. The paradox that Demeter is strongest in the oldest surviving version is explained by some scholars as reflecting an actual loss of

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status for women at some point in prehistory. (The evidence for this will be examined in Chapter 4.) Yet the same paradox should caution us against assuming that women in what we consider oppressively patriarchal systems are unconscious of their oppression and unable to protest against it.

As in antiquity, the stories we tell ourselves today – or read to ourselves, or 'consume' by watching television or video – bear a complicated relation to our gender system. They may sustain it by assuring us that it is good, or getting better. They may hold out visions of radical or incremental change in various utopian futures, or conjure up dystopias in which the rights we enjoy are swept away. They may rewrite the past, as the *Xena: Warrior Princess* television series blends myth with history and with the conventions of modern fictional genres like soap opera and situation comedy. Already in antiquity there was a range of such *genres* – *types* of literary texts and/or performances – in which the myths were presented. Each genre had a distinctive audience for which it was shaped, although our knowledge of these audiences is limited by the gaps in our evidence; sometimes our only or primary evidence for the makeup of the audience is in the text itself. When classical myths or other traditional stories are retold or adapted to new media, they must be changed enough to appeal to the modern audience – as its tastes are understood by the producers of the media. While there is danger of corporate censorship as the media are owned by a shrinking number of huge conglomerates, the internet and affordable video cameras hold out the prospect that artists with small means will be able to reach a wide audience. 'Niche marketing', in the media as in other sectors of the economy, targets increasingly specific groups, some of which are all-male or all-female. Romances, tailored for women, are divided into multiple sub-genres according to the ages and tastes of the target audiences; mysteries, thrillers, and fantasy novels, which may be intended for male and/or female readers, are similarly diversified. Like the myths in their ancient contexts, all of these fictions participate in the gender system and sustain or challenge our individual senses of gender identity.

A gender system, then, is *both* a nexus of symbols and assumptions – expressed, among other ways, in stories – and a set of

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relationships in the 'real world'. We can live within such a system without being aware of it, just as we can speak our native languages without learning formal grammar, or retell a story without analysing its meaning. Even for those who are aware, elements of the system can remain below the threshold of consciousness most of the time. Sometimes this is due to a person's social status or role(s), which can blind her or him to whole areas of the system. But because it is 'the way things are', the gender system tends to become naturalized so that even its challengers act according to its prescriptions much of the time. This explains why 'consciousness-raising' – women's sharing of common experiences to reveal oppressive aspects of the system – has been such a powerful technique for feminists, but it also explains why consciousness-raising cannot be done once and for all.[26] It can be especially difficult to realize, and to *keep* in mind, that the gender system is part of a larger social reality in which social class, race, and membership in various subcultures affect the privileges and perceptions of every man and woman. We cannot assume that all women will share the same experiences, any more than we can make that assumption about all men. While all of us, male as well as female, can 'identify with' Demeter's loss of her daughter, different groups will see different things in her story and may react differently to it or identify more fully with Persephone, Hades, or some other character.

A gender system evolves over time. Sometimes the change is rapid, as it has been in our own time. Yet while some aspects of our system – such as the expectation that most women will work only in the home – have changed radically in recent years, other aspects – such as the expectation that most child care will be done by women – have not, and can even seem to be cast in stone. Such conservative elements may be shared by systems that are far removed from each other in time. This is one way to account for the enduring appeal of a myth like that of Demeter and Persephone: it continues to make sense to people of both sexes who have been reared primarily by their mothers.

In fact, feminists have argued that child-rearing arrangements are crucial to the 'reproduction' of the gender system, its transmission from generation to generation.[27] This is not just because

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mothers are our first teachers, but because the dependent state of infants makes the first years of life crucial to the development of identity, including gender identity. Psychologists believe that the conditions under which this development takes place leave an indelible imprint in the unconscious. Although psychologists tend to study the unconscious of the individual as shaped in the context of the family, their approach can also shed light on the unconscious dimension of larger social realities such as the gender system. And they can help us probe the deep connection between the stories we tell and the identities we forge for ourselves. In fact, modern psychology, beginning with Freud, has taken a keen interest in myths, both as evidence for the mental processes it studies and as phenomena to which its theories can be applied. I will argue in Chapter 5 that there is such a thing as a political or ideological unconscious, which is also reflected in myths.

I have noted that a given gender system evolves over time. Yet even when we attempt to 'freeze' the process for purposes of analysis, we find that such a view – called *synchronic* (that is, a view of data noted at the same point in time) – contains internal contradictions. For example, most systems contain contradictory stereotypes of each gender. In the Homeric epics, men are portrayed as the protectors of women, yet they capture the wives and daughters of other men and use them as slaves or concubines; indeed, the possession of such women is considered a mark of high honour. In the *Hymn to Demeter*, Zeus is Persephone's father and Hades her husband, two roles that ostensibly involve guardianship and protection. Yet Zeus permits, and Hades carries out, Persephone's forcible abduction. Other contradictions can be found between stereotypes and social practices or norms. Thus both Greek and Roman women were described as avid for wine and sex while men were thought to have greater control over their desires; yet men enjoyed much greater licence both in their use of wine and in their access to sexual gratification.[28]

The structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that the chief function of myths was to 'mediate' between contradictory elements in the ideology of a culture – to enable people to accept the contradictions by displacing them and providing a 'third term' that seemed to

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reconcile the apparent opposition. A god such as Dionysus, who combines attributes of both females and males and encourages his worshippers to assume temporarily the roles of the opposite gender,[29] might be seen as such a mediating figure in the opposition between the sexes that runs so deep in Greek culture.

A gender system, then, contains internal contradictions. At the same time, individuals and groups within a given society can disagree and argue openly about their gender system. Such disagreement is probably louder and more widespread today than it was in ancient times, but the *Hymn to Demeter* is clear proof that the ancient Greeks could imagine violent disagreement, with dramatic implications, about at least one aspect of their gender system, namely, the balance of power between father and mother in decisions about a daughter's marriage. As this example illustrates, differences of opinion are not purely idiosyncratic but often correspond with social roles and involve power imbalances or power struggles. The *Hymn* is today considered a particularly precious document because it emphasizes the viewpoints of a mother and daughter rather than those of the male figures in the story. Because nearly all the works to survive from antiquity were composed by men for largely male audiences, the viewpoints of male figures (characters and narrators) tend to predominate. Even in the work of male authors, however, we have evidence of disagreements over gender arrangements, not just between male and female characters but between male and male, female and female. In tragedy, female parts were played by men. Yet the tragedian Euripides created especially vivid female characters who speak explicitly of their hardships as women and of their disagreements with men. The chorus of his *Medea* (410-30) says that if women were poets, they would 'sing an answer' to the men who portray them as treacherous.

Yet even a work like the *Hymn to Demeter*, with its vivid portrayal of feminine protest against a father's unilateral decision, ends with the goddesses accepting the status quo, including the rule of Zeus and the marriage of Hades and Persephone. Does the myth actually make the status quo more palatable by providing an 'escape valve' for the protest? This raises the question of whether myths, and stories like them, necessarily help to shore up the gender system to

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which they belong. My answer is that it depends on the *version* and on the *audience*, since myths are never monolithic. As we have seen, they come in a variety of versions, representing a range of authors' perspectives. At the same time, each version can be received differently by different members of its audience. We can see this most clearly in the responses of our contemporaries. Thus Euripides, who produced some of the boldest variations on the myths, is read by most modern scholars as deliberately unsettling the norms of his society, including reverence for its gods; but even he has been read as affirming the gods' goodness and benevolence.[30] There must have been similar differences of opinion among the members of his original audience. Certainly there was disagreement about the value of his plays: he was repeatedly chosen as one of only three tragedians whose works were staged at civic expense, yet he very seldom won first or even second prize. That his ideas, and not merely his style, were debated can be seen from Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs*, where the god Dionysos is portrayed as having to choose a playwright – Aeschylus or Euripides – to bring back from the dead. While their styles are compared in detail, the god's decision ultimately hinges on the advice each poet has to offer the city. He chooses Aeschylus.

To summarize, then: a gender system is a nexus of ideas, images, and practices, functioning at a given time and place in the 'real world'. People can live within it and follow its rules while remaining largely unconscious of it. It changes over time, but it must be reproduced from generation to generation and thus has important conservative elements. The mode of its reproduction within the family helps to account for its unconscious dimension, as well as its relationship to the individual's sense of identity. Yet it is not monolithic, for it contains internal contradictions, and those who live within it can disagree about its apportionment of roles and power.

Myths have a dual function within such a system. As traditional stories, handed down from generation to generation, they participate in the reproduction of the gender system and can help people to ignore or to live with its contradictions. Yet myths exist in multiple versions that can reflect the differences of perspective and the struggles for power within the system. It is not necessary, then, for a feminist to take a wholly pessimistic view of mythology, and I

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will not take such a view here. I believe it is important to uncover the workings of the gender system if we are to improve the lot of women; but this involves celebrating the multiplicity of perspectives within the system as well as criticizing its oppressive aspects. This dual approach – both celebratory and critical – will inform my book as a whole.

Modern interpretations of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

I chose to begin with the myth of Demeter and Persephone not just because it is still popular with modern readers but because it has been studied from many different angles, using the lenses of many different fields of scholarship. Suppose our young friend Sara were to write a research paper about the myth for her university course, focusing on the interpretation of the *Homeric Hymn*. What kinds of published studies would she find? What range of approaches might she encounter?

If she is lucky, or well-advised by her teacher, she may come upon Helene Foley's edition of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.[31] In one volume, she will find an English translation (on facing pages with the Greek text), a line-by-line commentary, and a collection of critical essays, beginning with Foley's own exhaustive interpretation, which includes a review of the major issues raised by earlier scholars. In Foley's commentary and in the footnotes and bibliography to her volume Sara will find references to a whole range of earlier interpretations, including some in Italian, German, and French. On pages 30-1, she will even find a complete list of the major Greek and Latin versions of the myth, some not yet translated into English. Following the leads in the footnotes, Sara identifies a number of earlier works to read; these in turn lead her to others.

The first essay she reads, conveniently included in Foley's collection, is 'Politics and Pomegranates: An Interpretation of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*', by Marylin Arthur. Combining literary and psychological approaches, Arthur compares the plot of the *Hymn* with the Freudian account of the 'normal' girl's psycho-sexual development, especially her 'phallic' phase. Arthur makes it clear

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that she does not accept all aspects of Freud's account, but she draws detailed comparisons between it and the *Hymn* to show that they describe a remarkably similar series of psychological reactions. In Demeter's case these are precipitated by her daughter's rape, whereas in the case of the little girl they are precipitated by the realization that she lacks a penis – and with it, as Arthur notes, the privileges it confers on boys and men. The first reaction in each case is withdrawal: the girl tries to deny her sexuality, while Demeter withdraws from the world of the gods and assumes the appearance of an old woman 'cut off from childbearing and the gifts of garland-loving Aphrodite'.[32] The next reaction in the girl is what Freud called 'penis envy', a desire to possess the male organ; this may be accompanied by hostility to her mother. In Demeter's case, the second reaction is her attempt to adopt a male baby and make him immortal; when the baby's mother interrupts her, she becomes furious with the mother. The final stage in the 'normal' girl's phallic phase arrives when she abandons the desire for a penis and substitutes the desire for a baby. In this phase she is able once again to identify with her own mother. In Demeter's case the third stage is her compromise and reconciliation with the gods, in which she is reunited not only with her daughter but with her mother Rhea. In both sequences the female protagonist at first revolts when faced with the prospect of subordination to a male regime but eventually becomes reconciled to the role she is assigned in that regime. Arthur suggests that the *Hymn* 'could be subtitled "How to be a Mother-Goddess in a Patriarchal Society" ' (216).

Sara's mother, while browsing in a bookstore, finds several recent books about Demeter. Intrigued herself and thinking it may be useful to Sara, she buys one called *Life's Daughter / Death's Bride* by Kathie Carlson.[33] A Jungian therapist who is also a feminist, Carlson believes in the reality of the goddesses – at least in so far as they represent archetypes, elements of 'the objective psyche that is common to us as a species and appears to transcend the boundaries of space, time, and consciousness' (3). In contrast to Arthur's and Foley's detached analytic approach, Carlson describes her personal reactions and those of her clients, urging her readers to 'enter into the myth' and 'experience [its] numinosity and mystery' (7). In at

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least two ways, Carlson believes, the myth can have healing power for us today as it did for the ancients: it can help us face and overcome the fear of death, and it can help us deal with the psychological effects of patriarchy. She describes two ways of reading the myth (primarily as represented by the *Hymn*). Read with a 'matriarchal accent', it emphasizes the positive nature of the mother-daughter bond and its power to reclaim life from death. Read with a 'patriarchal accent', it emphasizes Persephone's need for a bond with the male as well and for a role in the wider world that can only be achieved by escaping her mother's 'binding' influence. Yet Carlson (like Ann Suter) points out that there is actually little evidence in the *Hymn* for the patriarchal view, beyond the claims of Zeus, Hades, and Helios (the all-seeing sun god) that the goddesses will receive honours in the new regime. Even feminists, Carlson argues, read the myth 'through a contemporary patriarchal filter' that makes maturity contingent on an escape from the mother-daughter bond.

Carlson refers several times to a book edited by Christine Downing, *The Long Journey Home.*[34] Intrigued, Sara looks it up in the university library and finds a collection that contrasts in interesting ways with Foley's. Like Foley's, it begins with a translation of the *Homeric Hymn* and includes a range of interpretive essays, but Jungian psychology is given pride of place and modern poems and short stories are included. Here Sara finds an excerpt from Bruce Lincoln's 1981 book, *Emerging from the Chrysalis: Studies in Rituals of Women's Initiation.*[35] As the title suggests, Lincoln sees the myth of Persephone primarily as the reflection of ancient ritual practice. Unlike most of those who take this approach, however, he argues that the Eleusinian Mysteries – which were open to men – were merely the final form of what began as a puberty ritual for girls. His book analyses a series of analogous rites that were or still are practised by the Navajo, the Tukuna of Brazil, and other peoples. And he cites an impressive number of details in the myth that can be seen as parallel to specific features of puberty rituals: the age of Persephone, who is described as an adolescent; the 'liminal' (transitional) nature of her experience in the underworld, when she has been wrenched from one secure status and has yet to receive a new

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one; her change of name, from Kore (a generic 'maiden') to Persephone (a personal name); her initiation into sexuality; the 'cosmic' implications of her experience; and her restoration to society in a new adult role. Sara sees a potential contradiction in the argument that Lincoln seems not to have noticed: he insists that Zeus has only benevolent intentions toward Persephone, while at the same time observing that her 'initiation' is accomplished by rape, a 'misogynistic' practice meant to '[teach] her proper submission' to males (78-9).

Extending her research, Sara tries an online database called Diotima: Materials for the Study of Women and Gender in the Ancient World (http://www.stoa.org/diotima), which includes extensive bibliographies as well as course syllabi, translations of ancient texts, and links to other websites. Here she finds a reference to Tina Passman's article, 'Re(de)fining Woman: Language and Power in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*'.[36] To use Carlson's terms, Passman sees the *Hymn* as speaking almost entirely with a 'patriarchal accent'. Her analysis is anchored not in psychology but in what she calls 'the sociology of Greek gender relations' (54). Passman sees the *Hymn* as reflecting a shift in prehistoric Europe and the Near East from social systems based on matriliny (which trace descent through the mother) and matrilocality (in which a family lives at the birthplace of the mother) to systems based on patriliny and patrilocality. Citing the work of earlier scholars, including Jane Harrison, Marija Gimbutas, and Gerda Lerner, Passman argues that matrilineal systems tend to be associated with religious systems in which goddesses are predominant; societies of this type tend to foster 'gender complementarity' – with division of labour, but sharing of power – in contrast to the rigid gender hierarchy of the Indo-European peoples, including the Greeks and Romans. The *Hymn to Demeter* portrays the goddess as unaccustomed to, and unwilling to accept, the patriarchal practice whereby the father alone arranges his daughter's marriage. But rather than endorse Demeter's protest, the *Hymn* portrays it as destructive to humanity. Zeus cannot ignore her power over fertility, but he 'tames' it by acting as if it were an 'honour' (Greek *timê*) that *he* is bestowing on her in exchange for her acceptance of his regime. Passman sees the myth as justifying that regime

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by '[lifting] Demeter and Kore ... out of time, making them *types* for all women' (67). In this view, the myth has an explicit ideological message; it provides what the social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski would have called a 'charter' for patriarchy (see Chapter 4).

In her mythology class, Sara learns of an approach called 'structuralism' that originated in anthropology and linguistics but has been applied to classical mythology by a school of French scholars influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Curious to see what a structuralist would make of the *Hymn*, Sara asks her teacher for some references and tackles a difficult but exhilarating article by Froma Zeitlin called 'Cultic Models of the Female: Rites of Dionysus and Demeter'.[37] Although the article focuses on the *rituals* in honour of Demeter, especially a festival called the Thesmophoria, Zeitlin includes the myth in her analysis of what these rituals contribute to the 'symbolic category of femaleness' in Greek culture. She begins by explaining that she has learned from Jean-Pierre Vernant, in whose honour the volume containing her article was published, 'to look at the bewildering variety of rites and myths of polytheistic religion as coherent elements in a logical system of values and practices' (129). Within this 'logical system', which Zeitlin anchors firmly in its historical context, she emphasizes three polarities: concealment versus opening or showing, chastity versus obscenity, and order versus disorder. During the Thesmophoria, the married women of Athens (whose version of the festival is best known) left their homes and camped together, without their husbands, on the hill where the male assembly normally met. They fasted and preserved the strictest chastity but were also required by custom to tell obscene jokes. This paradox corresponds to the fact that Demeter in the myth is 'desexualized' by her disguise as an old woman, yet laughs and is cheered by the sexual joking of Iambe. Her experience parallels that of her daughter, who at first refuses to eat but ultimately, in a symbolic consummation of her marriage to Hades, eats the 'honey-sweet' seeds of the pomegranate. The chaste woman must conceal her body and may also have to repress her desires, but in order to conceive and give birth she must open herself to sexuality. 'The coexistence of [chastity and obscenity] within a single ritual expresses the inherent "double bind" ... [that] demands chastity

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from the wife and yet insists on her sexual nature' (149). The *Hymn* solves this dilemma by moving it to the divine level and by re-enacting the separation and reunion of Demeter and Persephone. The possibility of their reunion 'denies ... the irreversibility of the linear human pattern and suggests a synchronic perspective in which mother and daughter are not separate entities, but only two facets of a single female figure' (149). Zeitlin's final point concerns the effect of the cult on the women themselves: when they were authorized to enjoy obscenity in the absence of men, did this 'creative transgression' give them power, or did it merely justify men's control of their sexuality by suggesting that they could not control it themselves? Zeitlin does not give a clear-cut answer but suggests that the poles of 'disorder' and 'order' remained in tension.

In an anthropology class, Sara learns of yet another approach to myth interpretation, that of folklore studies. She can find no obvious application of this to the *Hymn* and decides to try it herself in the research paper she is writing. In Foley's volume, she recognizes some elements of the folklore approach in a paper by Mary Louise Lord called 'Withdrawal and Return: An Epic Story Pattern in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and in the Homeric Poems'. Lord is building on the work of her husband Albert B. Lord, a scholar of comparative literature who studied the living oral epic tradition of what was then Yugoslavia and used it to illuminate the Homeric poems. Mary Louise Lord begins by noting that in an oral tradition, 'certain story elements tend to belong together and to recur in essentially the same pattern or grouping of themes' (183). She proceeds to outline a pattern she calls 'withdrawal and return', in which 'the hero (or heroine)' withdraws from action, often in anger, and sometimes in disguise, receives hospitality, is recognized, causes (if only by absence) some form of disaster, returns and is reconciled to those (s)he had left. Lord traces this pattern in detail as it appears in both Homeric epics and in the *Hymn to Demeter*, but she does not deal explicitly with gender differences between Demeter and the male heroes. Sara builds on Lord's plot comparisons to argue that an audience familiar with the pattern would have seen the *Hymn* as emphasizing Demeter's power rather than – or in spite of – the compromise she is forced to accept.

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Myth interpretation has a long and complicated history, which this book does not attempt to retrace in detail. Scholars in many fields have contributed to it, most notably psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians of religion, and literary critics. 'Classicists' – professors of Greek and Latin – are trained primarily as philologists, that is, as 'lovers of words' whose primary competence is in reading and translating the ancient texts. Some classicists in every age have taken a broader view of their subject, analysing the texts as works of literary art and investigating the social and cultural contexts in which they were produced. In the twentieth century this became the norm for classical research, with the greatest acclaim – and controversy – surrounding scholars who combined a traditional interest in 'what the texts say' with the methods and theoretical perspectives of other disciplines. (For some outstanding examples, see the suggestions for further reading at the end of this book.) Yet some classicists are still resistant to contemporary theoretical approaches, from the study of literature as well as from psychology and the other social sciences.

As academic disciplines become more specialized and as published research multiplies, it becomes harder to claim a competence in fields outside one's own.[38] Specialization has the effect of arousing suspicion that 'outsiders' lack the knowledge to contribute anything of substance to one's own field. As I will show, errors of fact are not uncommon in works of myth interpretation, and such errors are hardly limited to non-classicists. But a few such errors do not automatically invalidate the whole of an argument. In contrast to a work like Geoffrey Kirk's *The Nature of Greek Myths*, which rejects many interpretations because they do not do justice to the uniqueness of Greek myth, I focus on what classicists can learn from other fields precisely because they offer us new angles of vision. This does not mean that I lump all myths together as expressions of universal human truths; I am myself suspicious of universalizing interpretations and offer criticisms of them in the course of this book. But I

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find that comparative and interdisciplinary work has produced valuable results that justify the emphasis I give it here.

In particular, I would argue that feminist scholarship, which has been interdisciplinary from the beginning, has something to offer every discipline. In most general books on classical mythology and its interpretation, feminist approaches are treated as if they constituted a field of their own, separate from and alternative to the major disciplinary approaches (psychological, anthropological, etc.). Sometimes they are dismissed as 'politically correct' and irrelevant to the ancient cultures. While it is true that feminist scholarship has political implications, there is very little scholarship – even in the 'hard' sciences – that does not. This book is intended as a demonstration that gender is implicated in *every* theoretical approach, and that it was the work of feminist women and men that brought this to our attention. A glance at recent work in fields like psychology and anthropology will demonstrate how profoundly they have themselves been transformed by feminist research. If mythology is inextricably involved in the gender system of a culture, neglect of gender issues is likely to distort the findings of the scholar who ignores them.

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