

Lovely-haired Demeter: The Hair Motif in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

In the Greek religious imagination, the color and style of a god's hair often crystallize essential aspects of their character or *τιμή*. As such, hair is a regularly-cited attribute of the gods in the *Homeric Hymns*. For example, *HH* 26 opens, "I begin to sing of ivy-haired Dionysus" (κισσοκόμην Διόνυσον... ἄρχομ' ἀείδειν, 1), foregrounding the god's cultic associations with ivy. In the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, the god's unshorn locks reflect his eternally ephebic nature (*HH* 3.450). In *HH* 22, Poseidon's dark blue hair (κυανοχαῖτα, 6) expresses his lordship over the sea, while in *HH* 31, Helios' bright locks (ἔθειραι λαμπραί, 11-12) evoke the bright rays of the sun.

In the case of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, the thematic prevalence of hair distinguishes the poem and articulates Demeter's associations with agriculture. The hymn's opening words announce that its subject is "lovely-haired Demeter" (Δήμητρ' ἡῤκομον, 1), and the motif of hair persists also throughout the poem. In this hymn to an agricultural goddess, hair imagery is specifically tied in with another widespread motif: flowers and plants. Although scholars have often commented on the abundance of flower and plant imagery in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (e.g., Richardson 1974, *passim*; Foley 1994, *passim*; Suter 2002, 49-71), and a few have noted the significance of hair in the hymn in passing (Richardson 1974, ad 176-81, 302, 454; Foley 1994, ad 168-89), no one has traced the importance of hair in conveying the major theme of agriculture in the poem. This paper argues that throughout the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, hair functions as an indicator of agricultural fertility.

The hymn exploits the natural affinity between hair and plants. Both grow, and both pertain to fertility, whether agricultural or sexual. In the hymn, hair color, in particular, is a marker of the fertility of an individual. Demeter's hair is blonde (ξανθός, 279, 303), like grain,

especially in scenes that emphasize her power. The epithet ξανθός is closely associated with grain: in a metaphor at *Iliad* 5.500, ξανθή Δημήτηρ separates grain from white chaff on a threshing-floor. Conversely, Hades is described as “dark-haired” (Αἰδη κυανοχαῖτα, 347). This epithet for Hades, unique to the hymn, represents his opposition to Demeter, because, as god of the underworld and the cause of Demeter’s grief, he is associated in the hymn with winter and infertility.

Furthermore, hair imagery tracks both the loss of fertility and its return to the earth that comprise the poem’s etiology for the agricultural cycle. At the loss of Persephone, Demeter dons a dark veil (κυάνεον δὲ κάλυμμα, 42), which covers her hair just as she covers the seeds in the earth to impose famine upon mankind (307, 353). The dark color of the veil represents Demeter’s grief and relates her hair to Hades’. In her meeting with the Eleusinian maidens, Demeter’s veiled head (κατὰ κρηθὲν κεκαλυμμένη, 182) contrasts strongly with their flowing yellow hair, which is compared to the bloom of a crocus flower (ἀμφὶ δὲ χαῖται / ὅμοις αἴσσοντο κροκηΐωι ἄνθει ὁμοῖαι, 177-8), and evokes the young girls’ sexual fertility. The contrast reminds us that Demeter’s own blonde hair is bound under her mourning veil.

In turn, once Persephone has returned and Demeter releases the earth from famine, the crops that will grow after the resolution of the poem are compared to hair. The growth of wheat is expressed with the verb κομήσειν (454), which shares the root of words used to describe Demeter’s hair (κόμαι, 279; ἡΰκομον, 1). This is the first attested metaphorical use of the verb κομᾶν, “to let the hair grow long” (LSJ s.v. κομάω). Thus, from beginning to end, the hair motif in the hymn serves to underline the theme of fertility, and tracks with the seasonal cycle of growth and death for which the hymn presents an etiology.

Bibliography

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