

fun of the tale comes from hearing the ways in which women learn to subvert the rules, twist the politics to their own advantage, and triumph as “uppity women” who can teach us a trick or two.

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THE NARCISSUS AND THE POMEGRANATE: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE HOMERIC HYMN TO DEMETER

Ann Suter
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REVIEWED BY SAMUEL WAGAR

I took part in a reconstruction of the Eleusinian Mysteries at a religious retreat earlier this year. The Eleusinian Mysteries were an initiatory series of rituals carried on in the town of Eleusis for a thousand years (from the eighth century BCE to their suppression by the Christians in the fourth century CE). They have been understood to be based on the story recounted in the seventh-century BCE *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. There was some provocative and interesting rethinking of the foundation myth of the mysteries and I was intrigued, so I asked for a list of recommended reading.

Everybody is vaguely familiar with the usual telling of the story: the

kidnapping and rape of Persephone (often called Kore) by Hades, god of the Underworld, with the approval of Zeus, and the mourning of Demeter, her mother, the grain goddess, who refused to allow food to grow and threatened to wipe out humanity until Hades was persuaded to let Persephone come back to be with her mother. Hades gave her a pomegranate seed (symbolic fruit of fertility and marriage) to eat and as a result Persephone was obliged to spend part of each year in the underworld. A good translation is by Charles Boer *The Homeric Hymns* (Spring Publications 1970), but there are many. This story is for us, although less so than for the Greeks, a foundation story of patriarchal family relations, in which the whole action centres on decisions made by Gods—Zeus and Hades—and the female characters are secondary to the main action, particularly Persephone, who is a trophy or prize, but not an independent actor.

Suter takes apart the poem, first of all, dividing it into the Olympian/patriarchal telling which frames an older myth and dealing with the two parts separately. The Olympian frame of the story gives Zeus and the gods power, whereas they are insignificant figures in the older story. She makes a strong argument for considering the usual story, the abduction, a later adaptation by the seventh century BCE poet involved in the religious rethinking which subordinated the local deities, often goddesses, and their rituals and festivals to the Olympian pantheon. Suter does not embrace the idea of the “Indo-European invaders” but sees the development of the patriarchal and Olympian pantheon as indigenously Greek. She also sees the evidence of direct links to the primordial Great Goddess in cultus as weak. Her survey of the linguistic evidence and the archaeological material is quite good and she backs up her points here convincingly.

She then subjects the older story, of Persephone’s descent to the Un-

derworld and the mourning of her mother, to several layers of reading, each of which is very interesting—beginning with the psychological reading of the life cycles of both the young goddess, the kore (maiden), and of the older goddess, Demeter. She talks here about the sexual maturation and breaking away from the mother of adolescent women as reflected upon in the story and also the reaction of older women to the maturation of their daughters.

She then reads the *hieros gamos*—the ritual of sexual union of the goddess of fertility with a god or human man to bring back the fertility of the Earth. It is Persephone who has sex, and she who is the power of fertility. Suter argues that Persephone is the older goddess and Demeter, who participated in *hieros gamoi* in other places, was later coming to Eleusis. The link between the suppression of the *hieros gamos* and other sexual rituals, not just in Greece but also in other parts of the Mediterranean world, as part of the patriarchal suppression of women deserves a deeper exploration, although Suter does not go beyond the poem and related Greek material to undertake it.

Suter looks at the competition between Demeter and Persephone and the relative ages of their cults at Eleusis. She surveys similar stories and the archaeological evidence from around the Greek world to place the Hymn into its historical context—when and for what reasons it likely was composed, what older materials it was constructed from and what great gaps in the evidence remain. She finds evidence of power struggles between the Olympian and pre-Olympian deities, and also between Persephone and Demeter—undercutting the traditional understanding of a cooperative mother-daughter pairing (except subsequent to the poem). As well, she finds no convincing evidence of paired worship of these two deities prior to the poem anywhere in the Greek world—the theory that sees them as aspects of the same goddess or of the poem as

reflecting long-standing cult practices is not supported. The practices of the Eleusinian Mysteries may not have included Demeter at all prior to the period of the poem's composition, and Suter presents strong evidence that the *hieros gamos* involving Persephone and Pluto / Hades was the centre of the earlier rites.

The amount of material Suter surveyed is impressive. She applies several well-developed layers of analysis to the poem. I had already been persuaded of a feminist reading of the story emphasizing Persephone's independent power as Goddess of the Underworld (see *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) and her free choice to take Hades as her consort, but on the basis of less evidence than Suter presents here.

Suter's reading of the poem is archaeological and literary and so she did not include the ecological shift in Greece that precipitated the Dark Age out of which the Olympians and the suppression of the goddesses emerged. The deforestation of ancient Greece resulting in desertification and a rapid decline in population surely altered the viewpoint of people about the all-benevolent Mother Earth goddesses.

My reading of Suter was informed by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and Roberto Calosso's *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, and the understanding of the gods presented in Greek drama—Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* particularly—and the Homeric and Orphic Hymns. By rethinking this foundation story, considering the free choice of the young woman goddess to rule over death and rebirth with her chosen consort, patriarchal family relationships, including the domination of the elder over the younger members, are challenged. By reawakening the joyful embrace of death by life, the mysteries can still move us. Beneath the misogyny and the Olympian overlay there are still some wonderful things to learn from the Greeks.

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TREASURES: THE STORIES WOMEN TELL ABOUT THE THINGS THEY KEEP

Kathleen V. Cairns and Eliane Leslau Silverman
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REVIEWED BY STEPHANIE DICKISON

The items which women surround themselves with—either kept tucked away in a shoebox under the bed or radiantly sitting atop her writing desk—are full of stories about the women who own them.

They might be held onto for a number of reasons—sentiment, practicality, or aesthetic pleasure. But do not mistake them for mere knick-knacks or *tchotchkes*. These items not only hold profound meaning for the women who possess them, but can help define and describe them by what events led them to this artifact and how it's transformed them.

Through candid interviews with over one hundred women with varying backgrounds and interests, we are invited into the front rooms and backyards of women across the country to hear the stories of how they and their items were united.

These stories are vital, not only from a historical perspective but because they remind women of their need to have meaning in their life, whether it is evoked by a grandmother's dress or dog tags from a beloved pet, sheet music from Czechoslovakia or a collection of fridge magnets

from trips abroad. It brings them back to memories of childhood, family and friendship, or encapsulates a time, event or memory. As described by the authors:

[The possessions] create a women's history which, while it might not appear in textbooks or museums, informs how women live their lives; how they earn their living; how they think; how they relate to their foremothers, their daughters, their friends and lovers. Women save possessions from their own lives and the lives of others to create both a personal and a collective narrative. As one of our participants, Paddy, put it, 'This is who I am, and this is where I come from, and these are my people.' The keepsakes comprise a story she tells herself and sometimes tells others. These stories create meaning for individual women, sustain the private culture of women, and encourage women to enter the public realm.

The stories that unfold are frank attempts to immortalize tender moments, everyday tales of lost loves, former lives lived and heirlooms passed through the generations. Most are touching, but more often heart-breaking, such as Carol's memory of her father's gift of a scapular:

I went on an exchange trip when I was in grade school to Trinidad, and, as I was leaving, my dad went out and bought this for my birthday. He always used to give my mom money for Christmas or birthday presents, and she would go shopping. I can still remember sitting in the house, and he just made me so nervous, and I remember sitting there and opening it and he said, 'I got that myself.' And it still chokes me up because he – it just made me feel good to think that he was thinking of