

## Classics / WAGS 23: First Essay

### *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter and the Iliad*



Thetis with dolphins  
Red-figure, late 6<sup>th</sup> BCE  
Attributed to Euthymides

Ungraded.

Due: February 16 (Wednesday) electronically by 5:00 PM. Please e-mail the text in a Word document to me at [ftgriffiths@amherst.edu](mailto:ftgriffiths@amherst.edu).

Length: ca 1,000 words (roughly four pages)

First-year students are asked to write a rough draft, to be discussed in a conference on February 15. Sign-up in class on February 11 for times; hours posted on the CMS page. Please submit your draft in advance of the session in which your conference is scheduled. Draft writers may then submit their final drafts as late as 9:00 AM on Thursday, February 17.

Other students will receive their essays in conferences on February 17 – 19. Sign-ups in class on February 16. Hours will be posted on the CMS page.

Write on *one* of these three topics and indicate clearly which topic you have chosen:



Demeter and Persephone  
Red-figure, ca. 480 BCE

## I. DEMETER AND THETIS

Thetis and Demeter are goddesses whose loss of children sets them apart from the other gods and puts them in an unusual relationship to mortals.

**First, discuss the similarities that you find central.** Some possibilities: What has caused the loss of the child? How does each goddess react? How does her grief affect her relations with gods and mortals? What movements through the cosmos does her predicament cause? What kind of exchange relationships does she enter into? In terms of status (mortal vs. immortal; male vs. female), how do Achilles and Persephone present comparable vulnerabilities? (Do not try to answer all of these questions or necessarily restrict yourself to them; they're just to get you started.)

**Second, how do the goddesses *differ* in ways that indicate the different outlooks of *Demeter* and the *Iliad*?** Possibilities: What is the difference between having the grieving mother as the protagonist and having her as the protagonist's mother? How much does the will of the child figure? What are the powers of the mother and how can she benefit her child. Who gives the child gifts?

Aim for coherence and feel free to be selective among the above possibilities or others that occur to you. This topic is tricky because you have to juggle two binary distinctions (mortal / immortal, female / male) in two texts. I do not expect you to touch all bases, but rather to make the best possible use of these four or so pages. The point is to find some area of contrast within these similar figures that highlights some aspect of the contrasting outlooks of the two poems.

## II. ACHILLES IN *ILIAD* 1 AND 24

The last book of the *Iliad* seems to have been composed to mirror and reverse book 1. For example, *Iliad* 1 ends with a quarrel on Olympus, *Iliad* 24 starts with one. In book 1, Achilles summons Thetis to take a request to Zeus; in book 24, Zeus summons Thetis to take a request to Achilles. Just as the priest Chryses comes to beg for the return of his daughter Chryseis, in book 24 King Priam comes to beg for the return of Hector's body – but that is a much darker scene.

The scheme of days in the epic also shows signs of symmetry:

Book 1

Book 24

1 - 9 - 1 - 12

12 - 1 - 9 - 1

The 9 days of plague in book 1 are balanced by the 9 days to gather wood for Hector's funeral. The 12 days of waiting for the gods to return to Olympus are balanced by 12 days at the start of *Iliad* 24 when the gods grow more disgusted at Achilles' abuse of Hector's corpse.

**How does Achilles end his role in the *Iliad* in terms that recall and modify the ways that he began his role in *Iliad* 1?**

Keep in mind that the composer(s) may not permanently change Achilles' character. Achilles may not, for example, be turned into a pacifist who will fight no more or into a good friend of Agamemnon's. (By comparison, Superman can in an episode suffer temporary amnesia but not Alzheimer's.) Achilles must keep his date with destiny (apparently well known already to "Homer's" first audience) and fall to the combined force of Apollo and Paris as he attempts to scale the walls of Troy. The poet of the *Iliad* presumably did have license to find new dimensions in the traditional saga by showing how, just before Troy fell, the great champion of the Achaeans turned into their nemesis and how, when he finally went back to fight, he did so for reasons that his comrades and the Olympians did not well understand. But this fascinating anti-Achilles, who is at the same time the most revealing aspect of the wrathful and tender hero, has to be returned to his traditional role at the end. There may be more to work with in Achilles' roles in books 1 and 24 than you can cover comprehensively. As with other topics, pick the instances that speak to your experience of the poem.

### III. SOMEBODY'S SON

Demeter and Thetis are not the only passionate parents in these poems. Metaneira and Priam also experience terror about their sons in the hands of dangerous figures, Demeter and Achilles. The hymn sings of the "the wrath of Demeter" in much the way the *Iliad* memorializes "the wrath of Achilles."

The second rage of Achilles, over the loss of Patroclus, invites comparison to that of Demeter in its intensity and in the way that it sends Achilles over the boundary from the human realm to the divine (though to the animal realm as well). That is, where the grieving Demeter descends to Eleusis and assumes human characteristics, Achilles (in the other direction) becomes godlike in his return to battle: in his divine armor, in receiving nectar and ambrosia, in his superhuman warrior strength, and perhaps even in his unrestrained emotions. In the reverse direction, Demeter in her masquerade as aged nursemaid takes on particularly un-godlike qualities: old, poor, undesirable, socially invisible, and partaking of human food. Both Achilles and Demeter become intensely willing and able to either help or harm the mortals around them.

These two cases of crossing over to the other side climax in anomalous rituals, both involving heirs to the local dynasties, that terrify and baffle onlookers: Demeter tires to immortalize the infant Demophoon by putting him in the hearth at night and anointing him with ambrosia, while Achilles desecrates the corpse of Hector (but Aphrodite preserves it with ambrosia, 23.212-20). Both grieving, raging figures are attempting to manage their own emotions by transforming these helpless princely bodies.

**Interpret these two strange rituals and consider how they characterize the different values and outlooks of the two poems.**

Some possible angles: How does each protagonist push a gender-defining activity (maternity, war) to the point that gender barriers begin to collapse? What does the protagonist think s/he is doing? What is each actually accomplishing? Or, from another angle, why does each fail? What is the disparity between the psychological meaning of the act (for the protagonist) and its social meaning (for the onlookers, for the parents)? Are other rituals available to achieve the same ends? How does each attempt to claim what does not belong to her/him. Aim for cohesiveness rather than trying to cover all angles.

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Some general tips on all topics:

**Give me your thesis earlier rather than later** so that I can know what to look for. Please do not spend the introduction rephrasing and justifying the prompt. Doing so is a way to get started without actually saying anything, but painful to read.

**Tell me what I do not know.** You are not writing for a general audience (e.g., in the manner of a book review) and do not have to re-explain the obvious or play my lectures back to me. *Do not summarize the plots.* Waste no space quoting long passages; *cite, do not quote* the text [format: "Achilles' dividedness emerges already in his private exchange with Athena (*Il.* 227- 256)."]. Cite *Demeter* by the page of the Course Packet translation.

**Make sure that you actually compare the two texts.** Do not discuss theme X in text 1 and then theme X in text 2 and close. You need either a third movement to compare what you have found in 1 and 2; or, better, talk about X in text 1 and then X in 2 and 1; or, best, go back and forth between the two texts, issue by issue (not always possible if theme X in text 1 is so complicated as to need a separate discussion).

**Be sparing with abstractions.** Since you are writing in unfamiliar territory, I am encouraging you to work from the manageably specific to the somewhat general. Some glamorous terms in this vicinity are terminally slippery: "fate," "humanity," "tragedy." "Fate" sounds grand and stirring, but in Homer it mostly amounts to "lifespan." Remember that the "mortal"/ "immortal" distinction is much firmer than "divine"/"human" (i.e., human beings can temporarily take on divine attributes without alleviating their mortality even slightly). When we get to tragedy, I'm going to try to wean you from the modern concept of "fatal flaw," which confuses interpretation.

**Style.** The *Iliad* has one "I." Refer to plot elements in the present tense ("Achilles withdraws..."), since you'll want to refer to the text in the present ("The *Iliad* concerns...."), and it's dauntingly difficult to mix in the past tense consistently ("As the plot complicates itself, Achilles withdrew...."). I correct punctuation, resentfully.

**Intellectual honesty:**

Please consult *Intellectual Honesty* on the course CMS page. Use of secondary sources, including the Internet, is not required or encouraged. All sources used should be cited. The reading questions, material from discussion, and e-mailed questions/comments can be taken as common knowledge and need not be cited. I refer any suspected plagiarism to the Office of the Dean of Students. When in doubt, please contact me. Once you start the essay, it is probably best to work up to the topic by a process of your own rereading and rethinking.

**Writing Center:**

Another pair of eyes can often be helpful, and sustained, systematic work with a tutor is a great way to become a better writer.

Office hours:

Mondays 2:00 – 4:00 and Wednesdays 1:00-2:00



Achilles dragging the body of Hector  
Black-figure, ca. 520-10 BCE  
Attributed to the Antiope Group