Persephone Screams, and We Listen: An Analysis of Sound in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

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Abstract

This paper analyses the thematic interactions with sound, dialogue, and the metapoetics of performance in the myth of the rape of Persephone as recounted in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter.* A product of the ancient Greek oral tradition, this text was meant to be performed, which is demonstrated in the stylistic as well as thematic aspects of the *Hymn*. However, the use of sound as a narrative vehicle conveys the emotional impact of Persephone's story to a modern reading audience as well. This paper then demonstrates how sound, silence, and speech are employed in the *Hymn* to generate a visceral reading experience of Persephone's abduction.

Introduction

The concepts of performance and recitation have a long history in the field of classics. Due to the prominence of Homer's epics in the field and the *nachleben* (afterlife) of these works in not only ancient but European literature overall, much work in classical studies has been dedicated to oral poetics. For this reason, the field of classics is a potential source of insight into performance, recitation, and sound in the wider field of comparative literature. This, however, too often manifests itself in research regarding how ancient literature is relevant for the interpretation of modern works, despite the fact that ancient literature *itself* is still read by modern audiences (Macintosh 247).

This bias in research on classics is unfortunate, since recitation and performance are a crucial part of contemporary poetry and, as such, interpretation of ancient poetry that originated in an oral society can offer useful insights. This paper intends to analyse one such ancient text, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter,* thereby exploring the way it engages its audience and drives home its emotional force through the use of (nonverbal) sounds, silence, and the metapoetics of performance. Being the earliest and most comprehensive ancient version of the myth of Persephone, the hymn is dedicated to the grief of Demeter, Persephone's mother, over the loss of her daughter. As a product of the ancient Greek oral storytelling tradition, this text was meant to be performed, which is demonstrated in the stylistic as well as thematic aspects of the hymn that depict Persephone's death and rebirth. The goddess Persephone is taken away from her idyllic life on earth to the Underworld by Hades, and is subsequently engaged in a perpetual cycle of life on earth and death down below after eating a few forbidden pomegranate seeds. Thus, the text invites sympathy for its protagonists' struggle with (symbolic) death, and employs the formal qualities of performative texts to elicit this affective response.

Most of the dialogues in the hymn occur in relation to Demeter's initial grief and subsequent joy. Contrastingly, Persephone's suffering, fear, and eventual relief are conveyed through a progression from nonverbal sounds to total narrative silence, and eventually, after her symbolic rebirth, to actual speech. This contrast between present dialogues of

the two protagonists of the hymn offers an immersive reading experience of Demeter's mourning and Persephone's suffering, wherein the evocation of sound specifically engages audiences across millennia. This effect of silence and speech in the hymn is so ingrained in the narrative that it affects not only an *ancient* audience engaged with the hymn's religious aspects, but also the *modern* reader. I argue that the text asks us to listen, quite literally, to grasp its emotional charge, and that this is sustained even for a modern audience that does not experience the text as a performance. Because of this particular aim of the text (i.e. to elicit sympathy for the protagonists), I would like to briefly touch upon affect theory, which Stephen Ahern defines as the theory of "embodied experience[s]" and the "promise of worldmaking they offer" to narrative (1). With the idea of sound and silence in the text as an invitation to an emotional experience for the audience, the text's poetics, despite their to us alien oral origins, offer an experience that is still affective.[1] The analysis of this paper is thus an invitation to connect such modern approaches of narrative mood and audience responses to the concepts of orality, recitation, and performance as put forward by the field of classics. Ultimately, this paper presents a comprehensive analysis of how sound is employed in the narrative arc of Persephone, and how it accommodates readers' (or listeners') responses, ancient and modern alike. This demonstrates how sound continues to accommodate affective receptions of both ancient and modern audiences, thereby challenging longstanding dichotomies between orality and textuality through the shared visceral engagement with the hymn by both these audiences.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and its Historical Context

Even if ancient performance of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is unachievable for a modern audience, providing a tentative historical

[1] Another theoretical advantage of affect theory is that it is consciously diachronic: it investigates the concept of affect throughout literary history, where historically applicable terms such as 'feeling' or 'passion' translate to emotion and experience. Ahern, for example, already discerns considerations of audience affectation in Aristotle's work on poetics. (See Ahern 1-6).

and performative context does help with understanding the text. The *Homeric Hymns* are Homeric in the sense that they follow the Homeric epic in terms of style and diction (Janko 196-198). They contain myths that recount the origin and powerful deeds of their respective hymned gods (Clay 11-15). It is not exactly clear in what setting the *Hymns* were performed, but, despite the aforementioned religious aspects of an oral society, performances most likely occurred at symposia, feasts and poetic contests (Clay, *Hymns* as Genre, 237). Accordingly, their content suggests a generic audience: similar to Homer, the *Hymns* do not focus on or adopt the theology of specific geographical regions, but rather present their stories as understandable and appealing to a broader Panhellenic audience (Clay 9-10). If we adhere to this assertion that the religious dimension of the performance has moved somewhat to the background, then it follows that the text as an act of worship is accessory, and that instead mythology and the audience's experience thereof should be prioritised.

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, then, is a text of praise for a goddess known across the Greek world, and uses a familiar story (i.e. the myth of Persephone's rape) to appeal to a universal audience. This use of the well-known myth accommodates the recounting of the foundation of Demeter's most impressive cult at Eleusis, a mystery cult that promised a blessed afterlife to its initiates. The crowd of initiates would gather in the temple at night and be subjected to what is known as the *dromena* (things done), the *deiknumena* (things shown), and the *legomena* (things said) (Bowden 38). These initiatory rites were indeed an impressive play on the senses, and ritual silences and sounds were an important part of this. For this reason, scholars have interpreted several scenes of the hymn, as discussed below, in which sound and silence play a role from a purely theological point of view (Richardson 1974, 25-26; Foley 1994, 62; Clay 1989, 261; Ribichini 2016, 171). This paper, however, counters the reductive idea that these sensory evocations of the text serve only to refer to a theological context. Rather, this paper's analysis serves to demonstrate how the text evokes an emotional response in the audience instead of a solely religious reading experience. Sound specifically as a poetic tool, in combination with performance, demonstrates a

dimension of the text outside of its written form. If we can analyse how sound was employed in texts that solely depended on their consumption as performed text (and how, in turn, that affects us as a modern reading audience now), we can create greater understanding of how poetic performance operates aurally. This hymn in particular can thus function as a temporal mediator—as its focus on death and its effect on the audience is uniquely meant to evoke an empathic reaction and climactic effect on readers across millennia.

The following analysis demonstrates how (nonverbal) sound and speech generate a climactic effect by following the hymn in a linear fashion, highlighting the points at which the narrator underscores or downplays sound and speech while using the speech-act of recitation to effectuate emotional climax. This emotional culmination centres on the experiences of Demeter and Persephone as they suffer and then reverse (a temporary state of) death and grieving. Thus, the use of sound ultimately creates an immersive experience of the goddesses' ordeals that engages the hymn's audience on a visceral level.

Analysis

The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* starts with the hymnic poet formulaically introducing their subject matter: "Of Demeter the lovely-haired, the august goddess first I sing, of her and her slender-ankled daughter, whom Aïdoneus seized by favor of heavy-booming, wide-sounding Zeus as she frolicked…" (*Hom hymn Dem.* 103, trans. M.L. West 2003).[2] The first word of the hymn, in traditional fashion, is the name of the god it is dedicated to, followed by a relative pronoun which introduces the myth (Nünlist 35). The narrator self-assuredly states that they are singing here, that it is their song that the audience is hearing in the present moment. Persephone's innocent frolicking through a florescent meadow is described but then violently interrupted by the appearance of Hades, who drags her off to the Underworld. This violent interruption of an idyllic scenario is reflected in the first few lines cited above: Hades enters the text at the end of the second line and the word 'seized' (ἥρπαξεν in

[2] All further citations of the *Hymn* are from this edition.

Greek) makes up the first word of the third line, likewise suddenly intruding upon the goddesses' existence (Foley 31). Thus, a sense of shock is conveyed to the audience by means of a violent narrative interruption.

As Persephone is dragged away, she is by no means silent about her experience:

> Seizing her by force, he began to drive her off on his golden chariot, with her wailing and screaming as she called on her father Zeus, the highest and noblest. But no one heard her voice, none of the immortals or of mortal men, nor yet the olive trees with their resplendent fruit—except that Perses' daughter still innocent of heart, Hecate of the glossy veil, heard from her cave, and so did the lord Helios, Hyperion's resplendent son, as the maiden called on her father Zeus (…). (*Hom. Hymn. Dem.* 19-27)

Up until the moment that Persephone recounts her ordeals to her mother at their reunion later in the hymn, this is the only sound that the young goddess makes: a nonverbal scream of agony. A subsequent appeal to her father Zeus in indirect speech does suggest verbality, but the audience is not allowed to hear these words. The narrative's depiction of Persephone's appeal to Zeus, who has planned the entire abduction, therefore suggests how powerless she is. Meanwhile, both Zeus and Hades remain fully silent. They never speak during the entire assault, either directly or indirectly, thereby distancing themselves from the hymn's audience. Whereas Persephone is reduced to the object of Zeus's schemes and Hades' violence, unable to voice her protests properly in dialogue, the two perpetrators quite literally hide away in narrative silence (Beck 58). This creates an interesting nuance: even though Persephone does not get to verbalise her suffering, the audience does get to hear *about* her experience through the narrator. We are privy to it, and yet a censorship occurs that portrays the violence inflicted on her.

Persephone's last scream, on the other hand, does reach Demeter:

> The mountain peaks and the sea deeps rang with the sound of her divine voice; and her lady mother heard it, and a sharp pain seized her heart, and the veil over her ambrosial locks tore apart under her hands. (*Hom Hymn. Dem.* 38-41)

Again, emphasis is placed on Persephone's voice and not on her speech. It is the sound of her 'divine voice,' which rings across a great distance and is heard by her mother, that is textually emphasised. As such, her voice has a transcendent quality: as it travels over land and sea it also travels across time, creating an appeal to the audience to witness her descent to the Underworld. Likewise, non-human entities are subject to personification when Demeter goes asking about her daughter's fate: "there was no one prepared to tell her the truth, either of gods or mortals, nor did any of the birds come to her with reliable news" (44-46), reflecting the worldly silence towards Demeter regarding Persephone's fate (Beck 58).

Demeter accordingly asks Helios if he knows where her daughter is, as she "heard her voice (…) but did not see it" (67-68). In this speech, it is emphasised that Persephone's voice was *heard*, but her abduction was not *seen*. The narrator thereby underlines Persephone's distress, but not the nature of that distress: it is the *experience* and resulting emotion of the abduction that is expressed again and again. In this way, the visceral experience of dying is evoked for the audience—the ignorance of what happens after death (or where one goes) is upheld, but the agony and grief it causes is foregrounded. Thus, Persephone's symbolic experience of sudden death is expressed in a way that lets the audience not only sympathise with the protagonist, but also informs the very process of the reading experience as her voice dies both narratively and stylistically.

Demeter's grief and rage are, contrastingly, not expressed through any sound at all. In lines 40 and 82, her reaction to Persephone's abduction is described as a pain that seizes her heart. Her distress is physical and not audible. Likewise, at several points in this passage, she does not motivate her actions, even though a speech act might be expected by the reading audience. Her decision to consult Helios is skipped over in the narrative, as is her direct reaction to Helios's words and her decision to

wander the earth afterwards (Clay 205). Demeter's grief and anger isolate her, which is conveyed through a literal and narrative silence that obscures her thought process. This silence is accompanied by Demeter's refusal to sit, eat, or speak once she enters the palace at Eleusis:

> But Demeter, bringer of resplendent gifts in season, did not want to be seated on the gleaming couch, but stood in silence (…). [F]or a long time she remained there on the seat in silent sorrow. She greeted no one with word or movement, but sat there unsmiling, tasting neither food nor drink, pining for her deep-girt daughter (…). (*Hom. Hymn. Dem.* 192-201)

The narrative function of Demeter's refusal to sit, eat, or speak is to convey, once more, Demeter's grief. This is implied by the action that initiates the enumeration of her odd behaviour as directly stated: 'pining for her deep-girt daughter'. The narrator is not at all obscure about this. There is a further connection to be made here between spatial interiority and narrative silence. While Demeter was uncertain about her daughter's fate, she wandered in the great wide open, but now that her grief is confirmed, she hides inside, her silence being more pervasive.

Metaneira, the queen of Eleusis, asks Demeter to nurse her son Demophöon, and the goddess, in disguise, agrees. When Metaneira discovers that Demeter attempts to burn Demophoön's mortality away in a fireplace, she "shrieked and clapped her two thighs in alarm" (246), and proceeds to lament him as if he is supposedly dead. Demeter reprimands her and, through her speech, finally reveals her true identity, which is followed by the physical transformation into her full divine form. While Metaneira is stupefied by this, her son Demophöon, now forever barred from immorality, cries out loud. Despite the significant similarity between Metaneira's trance-like silence and Demeter's silence as sign of anguish, I shift the focus to Demophöon, who wordlessly but noisily expresses his distress in a "piteous crying" (284), much like Persephone, Demeter's own child. Despite surrounding efforts to console him, Demophöon's distress is "not to be comforted" (290) due to

him now being mortal. Thus, his suffering is compared to Persephone's suffering at the beginning of the hymn, and their respective 'deaths' and mortality are expressed through these cries, further foregrounding Persephone to the audience of the hymn.

The Eleusinians then build Demeter's temple, and here she once more hides away, adopting again both a sense of interiority and silence. The narrator underlines once again her anger and grief by adding that she is "apart from all the blessed gods" and "pining for her deep-girth daughter" (303-304). She stops the seed from sprouting, starving everyone on earth (298-309). Zeus sends Hermes to fetch Persephone from the Underworld. When he encounters her, Persephone still does not speak, although she is "full of resistance from longing for her mother" (343-344) and subsequently "delighted" at her regained freedom while "jump[ing] up in joy" (370-371). This joy marks a shift towards speech after she returns to the land of the living. When Persephone is first reunited with her mother, Demeter "rushe[s] forward like a maenad on the shady-forested mountain" (386). This analogy is peculiar: Demeter is compared here to a (female) follower of Dionysus, who were known for their madness under the influence of their god. While this usually has a negative connotation, here this wildness portrays Demeter's utter and untameable joy. Whereas so far nonverbal sound has expressed their distress, now the goddesses express their newfound joy verbally. Subsequently, Persephone starts to speak directly for the first time in the narrative. Persephone's first speech act thus only occurs after she has regained life and returned to the company of her beloved mother. This is further underlined by the fact that Persephone only speaks at Demeter's request to verbalise her ordeals: "but tell me, how did he snatch you down (…)?" (403a-404). Therefore, the narration of both goddesses undergoes a shift from 'silence' to direct speech in their joy. Consequently, Persephone's first speech occurs when she is finally back in the land of the living, reborn as it were, and can therefore finally tell the audience directly what happened to her during her abduction.

Persephone's speech mostly repeats what the audience already knows about her abduction, but Persephone emphasises in particular the veracity of her account:

> Well, mother, I will tell you everything just as it was. (…) I will explain and go through it all, just as you ask (…). He went off below the earth with me in his golden chariot, for all my resistance, and I screamed aloud. I'm sorry, but that's the whole truth I'm telling you. (*Hom. Hymn. Dem.* 406-433)

Nicholas Richardson, who wrote the first comprehensive commentary on the hymn, interprets Persephone as lying in this scene in order to embellish the horrors of her ordeal, simply because she sympathises with her mother (286). I would argue, however, that her assertions of truth are expressions of heightened emotion, once more underscoring and finally successfully mediating her experienced distress. Before her last assertion, Persephone continues the narrative's already repeated mentioning of her screams (432). This is only possible because Persephone reverses the narrative events in her speech. She first tells her mother of being freed and tricked down below, and only then recounts her abduction. The affective emphasis is thus placed on the latter, retaining her actual abduction as the dominant dramatic moment of the story. This way of ordering the events is not so much meant for Demeter, the primary addressee, but for the audience. We, as much as Demeter, are meant to hear and listen to Persephone, and thereby experience her distress at being dragged off to the Underworld. In structuring her speech thusly, the abduction (Persephone's screaming) is directly followed by its mirror image, Persephone and Demeter embracing and rejoicing in each other's presence. Persephone's initial narrative silence is thus directly juxtaposed to verbalise experience in her only speech act in the text. As sudden as the beginning of the hymn turns from an idyllic to a violent narrative mood, now as equally drastically is the audience subjected to the reverse: "so they then all day long (…) warmed each other's hearts" (435-436).

In the hymn's epilogue, Demeter gifts the Eleusinians the mysteries. The narrator here slips into the present tense while describing the rites:

> [T]he solemn mysteries which one cannot depart from or enquire about or broadcast, for great awe of the gods restrains us from speaking. Blessed is he of men on earth who has beheld them, whereas he that is uninitiated in the rites, or he that has had no part in them, never enjoys a similar lot down in the musty dark when he is dead. (*Hom. Hymn. Dem.* 478-482)

Exactly when the poet refers to the sacred taboo, it is nearly broken when the audience is being told of the *consequence* of being initiated in the rites. Still, the poet's use of 'men on earth' leaves the description rather in the middle, creating a universal applicability which includes the poet's audience but does not address it exclusively. In doing so, the message of blessedness is projected to extend *beyond* the direct audience, and pertain to, indeed, *all* mortals everywhere and at any time. The poet's final address is to the goddesses themselves, which the poet makes explicitly atemporal, due to the gods being eternal:

> So come, you that preside over the people of fragrant Eleusis, and seagirt Paros, and rocky Antron—Lady, bringer of resplendent gifts in season, mistress Deo, both you and your daughter, beautiful Persephone. (*Hom. Hymn. Dem.* 490-493)

Through this address, the poet's goal of manifesting the deities in the here and now of performance is fully realised. Drawing attention to the present thus highlights the immersive experience that the hymn's narrative has created, and expresses how the poet's own performance has influenced the direct audience. This portion of the hymn, however, is much more bound to formulaic language than the rest of the hymn, and thus somewhat alienates a modern audience. Still, the poet's formulaic closing line to the goddesses ("and I will take heed both for you and for other singing" 495) moderates the formulaic address, as it explicitly refers to the sound of the poet's own speech-act, the hymn itself.

Conclusion

My analysis has demonstrated what role sound (in particular that of screaming and different types of speech) plays in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter.* The careful interchange of nonverbal expressions, direct and indirect speech, and actual silence heighten the audience's emotions concerning the mother-daughter drama that is played out in the hymn, which creates a culminating effect that ensures an elevated climax at the goddesses' reunion. Sound in the hymn serves to convey the experiences of both Persephone and Demeter, and it thus informs the affective engagement of the hymn with both a historical and modern audience. As such, my reading of the hymn has attempted to elicit the narrative mood of the story, which presents itself as an immersive experience about rape, death, and grief. A large portion of the poet's use of sound is metapoetic: since the text was meant to be performed and is explicit about this feature, every instance of sound and silence is received aurally by both characters and the audience, creating an immersive experience of the hymn.

The use of sound as a narrative vehicle in a text that was originally meant to be recited and empathically performed demonstrates the fusion of style, content, and intent that is relevant for the analysis of poetics and poetic audience experience overall. The hymn asks us to listen to its own narrative, even in its written form, and thus consistently draws attention to its own nature as speech-act. Through repeated references to (nonverbal) sound and silence, the lines between orality and textuality are blurred, and the affective charge of the text is sustained. As such, the reading of an ancient text, such as the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* that originated from an oral poetic society, demonstrates how the affective audience experience of the hymn can be elicited through the use of sound as a narrative vehicle. By listening to the story, but also by reading it, one can hear Persephone's screams and Demeter's deafening silences, and so the audience—both ancient and modern—viscerally experiences their awful separation and joyful reunion through life and death.

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Biography

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