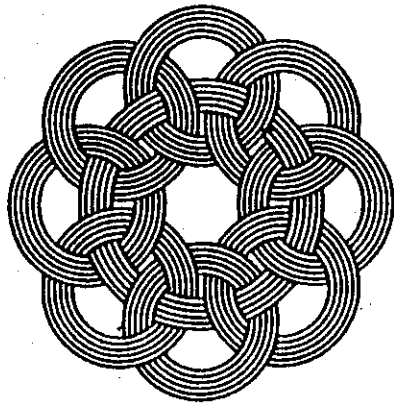


EDITED AND WITH ESSAYS BY IRENE DIAMOND
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REWEAVING THE WORLD

*The Emergence
of Ecofeminism*



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Mara Lynn Keller

THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES: ANCIENT NATURE RELIGION OF DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

ANCIENT GREEK PEOPLES voiced their understanding of nature, themselves, their community, and the cosmos through sacred stories called myth or *mythos*. The myth of Demeter and Persephone illuminated the experiences of life that through all times remain the most mysterious—birth, sexuality, death—and the greatest mystery of all, enduring love. In ceremonies devoted to the two Goddesses, people expressed their joy in the beauty and abundance of nature, including the provident harvest of their crops; in personal love, sexuality, and procreation; and in the rebirth of the human spirit, even through suffering and death. Cicero wrote of these rites: "We have been given a reason not only to live in joy, but also to die with better hope."¹

The Mother Earth religion did not glorify the sacrifice of her children, but celebrated their birth, enjoyment of life, and loving return to her in death. As Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.) wrote in *The Libation Bearers*, "Yea, summon Earth, who brings all things to life / and rears, and takes again into her womb."²

Demeter's rites were celebrated most elaborately at Eleusis, 14 miles northwest of Athens, where they flourished for almost 2,000 years. Here people of the Mycenaean era built their first shrine to Demeter about 1450 B.C.³ The Eleusinian mysteries were the greatest of all ancient Greek religious festivals. During the Archaic period, celebrants came to Eleusis from all of Greece; during Hellenistic and Roman times, as many as 30,000 celebrants gathered together from around the known world.⁴ During the later eras, the rites remained open to all, women

and men, young and old, slave and free. The main requirement for initiation was that a person have no unatoned blood guilt on his or her hands.

FERTILITY AND BIRTH

The most ancient of the Greek Goddesses, according to the Greek poet Hesiod (about 800 B.C.) was Gaia, Mother Earth. The poet of the Homeric "Hymn to Gaia" praises the primal Goddess with this song:

Mother of us all, oldest of all, of the earth,
 the sacred ground,
 nourishing all out of her treasures—children,
 fields, cattle, beauty . . .
 Mistress, from you come our fine children and
 bountiful harvests;
 Yours is the power to give mortals life and to
 take it away . . .
 Hail to you, mother of Gods.⁵

Demeter, like her grandmother Gaia, was the Earth Mother. She was One-in-Many, Many-in-One, the Earth and the fruits of the Earth. Demeter's rites were fertility festivals, praising Demeter the Great Mother, giver of children and crops, and her daughter Kore, also called Persephone, the Grain Maiden, who embodied and in turn would bear the new crop.

Demeter was revered as the Goddess who taught the cultivation of grain to the Greek people, enabling them to enhance with their own ingenuity and energy the fruitfulness of the Earth and the material abundance of their lives. During Demeter's ancient ritual, the peoples of the farming community, standing first at one side of their fields, then the opposite side, fervently invoked the creative forces of nature for their crops, calling to the sky: "HYEI, rain! pour down!"; then to the Earth, "KYEI, conceive! bring forth!"

Demeter was invoked by many names: *Carpophorus*, Fruit-bearer; *Thermasia*, Warmth; *Chloe*, Green; *Anesidora*, Sender-up of Gifts; *Thesmophoria*, Lawgiver; and in her aspect of healer, *Phosphoros*, Light-bearer. In Arcadia she was sometimes addressed as Demeter *Erinyes*, the Furious, and sometimes as Demeter *Lousia*, the Gentle.⁶ The rhetorician Crates in the fourth century B.C. explains that: "Demeter be-

stowed on us two gifts, the greatest gifts of all: first, the fruits of the earth, thanks to which we have ceased to live the life of beasts; and second, the mysteries; and they who are initiated therein have brighter hopes both for the end of their life and for all eternity."⁷

Demeter was closely related to the Goddess Isis of Egypt. On the Aegean island of Delos, Demeter and Isis were worshipped side by side. Both Goddesses were worshipped as giver of grain and of the laws of civilization; as healer; as queen of the dead; and as the one who provided the mystery of resurrected life. According to the myths, Demeter brought her daughter back from the underworld, while Isis brought her beloved partner Osiris back to life after he had been killed by his brother Seth, who wished to take over Osiris's kingdom. According to the Greek historian Herodotus (fifth century B.C.), the knowledge of agriculture was first brought to the peoples of Greece by the women of Egypt.⁸

At Eleusis, and in other sacred precincts, priestesses of Demeter were called *melissae*—bees, producers of sweetness. Various plants were especially sacred to Demeter: wheat and barley, basic food sources; the many-seeded pomegranate, symbol of fertility and sexual pleasure; and poppies, symbol of sleep and death. The prolific and nurturant pig was also sacred to Demeter; as were the playful dolphin, the peaceful dove, and the powerful, graceful horse. Snakes, too, were frequently included in ritual ceremonies of the Earth Goddess religion. Snakes protected the grain harvest from being eaten by rodents. And because snakes shed their skin, they were closely linked to healing and reincarnation. The sphinx, with its lion's body, great wings, and woman's head, was another symbol found in the artwork of Eleusis, combining elemental physical, psychic, and spiritual powers. I see the sphinx, like the snake, as a major symbol of the early mother-clan or mother-rite Goddess cultures.

Along with the Earth Mother's rituals for farming, ancient peoples also celebrated their community's renewal through sexual union and the birthing of new human life. Demeter's rites, we are told, were "performed with the same intent concerning the growth of crops and of human offspring."⁹ One of the major purposes of the mother-daughter Goddess religion was to instruct girls about their fertility and the unfolding patterns of women's lives. As Demeter was protectress of childbearing, so one of Persephone's names was "midwife."

Ecofeminist philosopher Charlene Spretnak, drawing upon the classical scholarship of Jane Ellen Harrison, Louis Farnell, Sir Arthur Evans,

and others, has created a prepatriarchal version of the Demeter/Persephone myth that does not include Persephone's abduction and rape, the aspect so greatly emphasized during the patriarchal epoch:

Demeter and Persephone share the bountiful fields, enjoying the beautiful earth, and watching over the crops together. One day, Persephone asks her mother about the restless spirits of the dead she has seen hovering about their earthly homes. "Is there no one in the underworld to receive the newly dead?" she asks. Demeter explains that she rules over the underworld as well as the upper world, but her more important work is above ground, feeding the living.

Reflecting on the bewilderment and pain she has seen in the ghostly spirits, Persephone replies, "The dead need us, Mother. I will go to them." After trying to persuade Persephone to stay with her, Demeter relents: "Very well. . . . We cannot give only to ourselves. I understand why you must go. Still, you are my daughter, and for every day you remain in the underworld, I will mourn your absence."

Persephone gathers three sheaves of wheat and three poppies, favorite flower of Demeter, takes the torch that Demeter has prepared for her, and begins her descent down into a deep chasm into the underworld. After a long journey, she comes to a place where many spirits are milling about, moaning. She moves among them, and after preparing an altar, she beckons them to her, saying, "If you come to me, I will initiate you into your new world. You have waxed into the fullness of life, and waned into darkness; may you be renewed in peace and wisdom."

Meanwhile, Demeter has grown sorrowful, her bountiful energies draining from the earth, leaving it barren, with no crops growing to feed the humans. After some months, Persephone decides she will return to the upper world. As she approaches her mother, the flowers of the earth rise up in joyful song, and as Demeter and Persephone run to embrace each other, the birds and animals begin to sing, "Persephone returns, Persephone returns." And as the mother and daughter dance and dance, new growth springs up in the fields, and the humans join in the rejoicing.

Each time Persephone goes back down into the underworld, the mortals share with Demeter the bleak season of her daughter's absence; and as she rejoins her mother in the spring, they are renewed by the signs of Persephone's return.¹⁰

This sacred story, while describing the relationship of the two Goddesses, mother and daughter, also explains nature's seasonal cycles of earthly abundance, barrenness, and renewal, as well as the seasons of human experience, from birth and maturation to death and beyond.

In the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," the poet describes the mother and daughter's reunion this way:

Then all day long, with their hearts in agreement, they basked
In each other's presence, embracing with love and forgetful of sorrow
And each received joy from the other and gave joy in return.

Such amazing love between mother and daughter has rarely been articulated or celebrated in the major patriarchal religions or literature of the world.

The hymn continues: "Then smooth-coifed Hecate came and lovingly kissed / The holy child of Demeter, and . . . from that time on / [was] Persephone's . . . faithful companion."¹¹ This part of the Demeter/Persephone myth lets us see the reverence among early farming peoples for the Goddess as girl, mother, and wise grandmother, an honoring of women in all stages of life.

Respect for the triple-aspected Goddess was also expressed in devotions to the moon, Selene, who passes through three phases—waxing youth, maturing fullness, and waning toward darkness and the unknown—before beginning another cycle. As we know, women's fertility cycles are closely tied to lunar cycles, and these in turn are linked to the measuring of seasonal cycles for the favorable planting and harvesting of crops.

Kore or Persephone, Demeter, and Hecate were names frequently given the triple Goddess. She was also called the three Fates, the three Graces, the nine Muses—and, as the customs of patriarchy grew, the three Furies.

Pausanias in the second century A.D. wrote that the three Fates were named Birth, Death, and Love; Love being the eldest.¹² And so we may assume, of these three destinies, love was primary, and the most honored.

SEXUALITY AND MARRIAGE

For the ancients, sexual love was considered one of life's deepest mysteries. It was experienced as the participation of the human body and spirit in the creative energies of nature, of the universe.

Demeter was first a Goddess in Crete before arriving in Greece. Homer writes that the Goddess herself made love in the fields: "So too fair-haired Demeter once in the spring did yield / To love, and with Iason lay in a new-ploughed field."¹³

The offspring of Demeter and Iason of Crete, according to Hesiod, was a son named Plutos. It seems fitting that the offspring of Demeter would be named Plenty, and that he be associated with Irene, Goddess of peace, who was often represented in art holding the infant Plutos in her arms. Abundance was also one of the names for Demeter. It is ironic, then, that Pluto, the "rich one" or "wealth-giver" became a name given to Hades, abductor of Persephone and brother of the war god, Zeus.

In Homer's account, Demeter yielded not to Iason, but to her own feelings of love, an experience conveyed by one word, *thoumos*, translated as spirit/passion/feeling: "Demeter yielded to her spirit/passion/feeling . . . and mingled with him in lovemaking and sleep."¹⁴ But in later versions of the story of Demeter and Iason, Demeter is raped by Iason. And into the religion of Demeter and Persephone itself come accounts of the rape of the Goddess by Zeus, Poseidon, or Hades.

In the lyrical language of a Homeric poet, the story unfolds: Persephone was

. . . playing far from gold-bladed Demeter of the harvest . . . gathering flowers with the daughters of Ocean, roses and crocuses and beautiful violets, iris, hyacinth, and the narcissus . . . a . . . lure for the blossoming girl according to Zeus's plan to please Hades, who receives all. It was an object of awe for all to see, both the immortal gods and mortal men. And from its root grew a hundred heads smelling a smell so sweet that the whole broad sky above and all the earth laughed and the salty swell of the sea. The girl was amazed and stretched out both her hands to take the marvelous bauble. But as she did, the earth gaped open and Lord Hades, whom we all meet, burst forth with his immortal horses . . . Begging for pity and fighting him off, she was dragged into his golden chariot. She screamed the shrill cry of a maenad . . .¹⁵

Demeter searched for her daughter for 9 days without food or rest, without success, and then lapsed into grief. The fields withered, and humanity was threatened by famine. Zeus finally reversed his decision and ordered that Persephone be returned to her mother. Because Demeter refused to abandon her daughter to her abductor, because of uncompromising refusal to accept Zeus's will, she did win back

her daughter, but only for two-thirds of the year. For the other third, because Persephone tasted the pomegranate seed, symbol of sexuality and fertility, she must return to Hades in the underworld.

In the patriarchal version of the Demeter/Persephone myth, and in the rituals of the Athenian and subsequent patriarchal periods, Demeter became increasingly less the Goddess of divine sexuality and procreation that she was in Crete. Her dual role of lover and mother became dichotomized. She became the grieving mother, while the virgin daughter became the focus of male sexual desire. In the later period, the "sacred union" or "holy marriage" of the Goddess and her partner, Persephone and Pluto, differed drastically from the more spontaneous and earthy sacred union between Demeter and Iason.

Finally, there also developed in the myth and ritual and legends associated with Demeter and Persephone increasing emphasis on the importance of a "holy son."¹⁶ In the Homeric hymn we are told that after Demeter lost her daughter she attempted to adopt a human son, Demophoon (his name makes him the symbolic representative of the people). Demeter sought to make Demophoon immortal by placing him at night in a sacred fire. But his mortal mother interrupted Demeter's efforts, and the Goddess departed angrily with these words: "Unknowing are ye mortals and thoughtless: ye know not whether good or evil approaches."¹⁷

Having lost her daughter, and now a son, Demeter fell into an even deeper grief than before, sitting in isolation in the temple she commanded to be built for her at Eleusis. She ignored all the pleadings of the Gods and Goddesses to return to the heights of Mount Olympus until Zeus decided to have Persephone returned to her. Then, according to the Homeric hymn, calling the people of Eleusis to her,

. . . Demeter made known her holy order of service,
teaching to all her most sacred rites . . .
When she had thoroughly taught them,
the queen among goddesses
Went with Persephone up to Olympus
among the assembly of gods . . .
Greatly blessed of men upon earth is the mortal
these goddesses favor with love.

In the rites of the Eleusinian mysteries, despite the increasing dominance of male Gods, the mother and daughter Goddesses remained primary. Sexual union was honored and celebrated as sac . . . And the

holy child—whether daughter or son—was joyfully welcomed and lovingly praised, as offspring of the Great Mother who graciously gives both new crops and new life to the human community.

Although Hades of the Olympian religion became lord of the underworld, his domain was for the Greeks one of pale and restless shades, and they built no temples to honor him. It was to Persephone, queen of the underworld, that the people prayed for guidance and courage in their journey into death. As it was to the Earth Mother, Demeter, that they prayed for abundance of life on this Earth.

DEATH AND REBIRTH

The belief of ancient peoples in the resurrection of life was closely related to their experience of nature, their experience of love. The reunion of the daughter with the mother/Goddess in the Demeter/Persephone myth must have been seen as a symbol of the human soul's return, after the death of the body, to its universal origin or loving source. In Athens, those who had died were called *Demetrioï*, the people of Demeter.

The precise secrets of the mysteries are not known. The Homeric poet said of these rites: "The essential gift of the ceremonies no man may describe or utter; / Blessed is he among men on earth who has beheld this."¹⁸

During the classical Athenian era, and later, the rites took place in the fall at the time of the equinox and lasted 9 days—the length of time Demeter spent searching for her lost daughter. Heralds were sent from Athens and Eleusis throughout Greece proclaiming the festival. All warfare was to cease for 2 months, and no legal proceedings were to be conducted during the 9 days of the rites.¹⁹

To begin the festival, the priestesses of Demeter carried her sacred objects in baskets on their heads from her temple at Eleusis along the sacred way, which was strewn with flowers and fruits, to the Eleusinian temple at the foot of the Athenian acropolis.

The opening of the festival during the Athenian era was officially proclaimed by the *hierophant*, the high priest. He invited those who had been initiated the previous spring into the lesser mysteries to become initiated now into the greater mysteries.

On the second day, the initiates, or *mystai*, were sent to the sea to bathe and purify themselves in the refreshing saltwater of the Aegean.

The third day was a day of ceremonies and special prayers for women and children and for state leaders and citizens.

The fourth day was devoted to Asclepius, God of healing; it was a day for more prayers and for healing dreams. It was also devoted in part to a ritual identification with Demeter in her grief, her sense of inexplicable loss—an experience keenly felt, we might imagine, by the indigenous Goddess peoples who must have looked upon the period of the patriarchal class takeover, at least in part, as a descent into hell.

On the fifth day, the initiates and the community journeyed westward from Athens to Eleusis, carrying at the head of the great procession the boychild "Iacchus." Toward evening, they bathed and refreshed themselves in special waters at the outskirts of Eleusis, before finally gathering by torchlight for the rituals of collective purpose.

This *panmycheis*, or nightlong revelry, included dancing by the women near Callichoron, the Well of Fair Dances. According to Euripides (about 484–406 B.C.) in his play *Ion*, all of nature responded to the dance of the women:

the starry ether of Zeus takes up the dance
the moon Goddess dances, and with her
the fifty daughters of Nereus dance in the sea
and in the eddies of the ever-flowing streams
so honoring the Daughter with the golden crown
and the holy Mother [Demeter]. . . .

The ancients believed that if these rituals were suppressed, if the collective purpose of the community would no longer find expression, the cosmos would fall apart.²⁰

On the sixth day, the *mystai* entered the sacred grounds of Demeter's sanctuary one by one across a bridge called the Bridge of Jest while the townspeople teased or ridiculed or told secrets about the initiate. This may have served to help the initiates rid themselves of whatever overbearing pride or arrogance might prevent them from opening themselves to the illumination of the mysteries.

The next day was a final day of preparation, of resting, purification, fasting, and sacrifice, of "making oneself holy," offering up to the Goddess whatever might still be hindering the soul's journey along its path.

The seventh and eighth nights were the nights of the mysteries, when the *mystai* entered the *Telesterion*, the temple of Demeter, the hall of initiation. (Perhaps in more ancient days they had gone down

into a womblike cave, the cave at the edge of the sanctuary, later named the *Ploutonion*, doorway to Hades.) During these 2 nights the initiates received the central experience of the mysteries.

No special creed was required of the initiates. The rites may have included a simple invitation to a communion of first fruits, a partial dramatization of the Demeter/Persephone myth, and perhaps a singing of the Hymn to Demeter relating the sacred story of the two Goddesses, and certain objects sacred to Demeter that exemplified the fertile forces of nature, such as symbols of human genitals or a single grain of wheat, may have been shown. The only detail we know with certainty is that during their initiation, the *mystai* witnessed a great blazing fire.

No doubt the fasting, prayers, and anticipation of the initiates helped clarify their inner vision. We are told that the initiates experienced a special seeing, the "opening of the eyes."

During initiation, the *mystai* may have felt abducted into the underworld, there remembering whatever they had lost to disease, pain, or death (remembering even the suffering stored beneath memory, in the recesses of the subconscious or in the collective unconscious of race history); felt overwhelming grief; and then experienced the healing, joyful embrace of the sacred union and the arrival of a new life.

Perhaps the initiate had a vision of the Goddess as Earth Mother; of Persephone returning from the dead; of the reunion of mother and child; of the essential nature of life and death. It may have been a vision of a vast sea of love all around, described by Diotima of Mantinea when she instructed Socrates into the lesser and greater mysteries of love, as related in Plato's *Symposium*. It may have been the experience of dying and being reborn, circled by a flow of love far beyond human ability to express in words.

Perhaps, finally, the initiates simply came out of the darkness at the moment of sunrise into a new day, into the upper world with its fertile land and waiting community of family and friends.

In all the years of the mysteries' celebration, the central experience of the initiation was never revealed. I believe this is because the mystical insight itself was beyond naming, ineffable.

The ninth day was for further prayers, pouring libations to the dead, and returning home.

An individual was initiated only once into the lesser mysteries, and only once into the greater mysteries. But these celebrations were repeated in the community generation after generation, century after century, millennium after millennium.

Pindar (518-438 B.C.) wrote: "Happy is he who has seen the Mysteries, he knows the source and the end of life."²¹ And Cicero, an initiate of the first century B.C., wrote that if Greece had existed for no other reason than to have brought into existence the mysteries of Eleusis, that would have been sufficient reason for her existence.²²

In a final sense, we may interpret the Eleusinian mysteries as a myth for our own time. There is a way in which the teaching of the journey of the soul transcends any particular time and place, age or gender.

The meaning I wish to evoke for us here is the remembrance of the early epoch of mother-centered life; followed by the separating away, the abduction, the death of this ancient way of life. That time has been followed by an epoch we might think of as the long period of patriarchal class rule, a long dark age reaching until this point where we stand poised between star wars and star peace, between the nuclear and ecological omnicide of the planet or the survival of our planetary community into a new world.

The renewal I long for is the return of a reverence for Mother Earth and her abundant forces of creation; an affirmation of the sacredness of sexuality and enduring human love; and the belief in the inevitability of death and the immortality of the soul.

It is a longing for the rebirth of the abundant love and nourishment of the ancient Earth Mother Gaia, Demeter, Persephone, Hecate, and for all the Great Grandmothers to be with us now, as comforters and guides, into the next stage of our journey in this life, with one another, on this beautiful planet Earth.²³

Notes

THE ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES:

ANCIENT NATURE RELIGION OF DEMETER AND PERSEPHONE

1. Quoted by C. Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (NY: Pantheon, 1967), p. 15.
2. Quoted by Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (London: London Press, 1962), p. 267.
3. George Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 14, 33-49.
4. See Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 8.
5. Thelma Sargent, trans., *The Homeric Hymns* (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 79.
6. See Harrison, *Prolegomena*, pp. 123, 285; Lewis R. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States*, Vol. III (New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas Brothers, 1977), pp. 75-85.
7. Quoted by Richard Trapp, "The Eleusinian and Dionysian Mysteries," paper presented at the Classics and Philosophy Colloquium, October 1982, San Francisco State University.
8. Harrison, *Prolegomena*, pp. 120-1, 128, 157, cites Plutarch as identifying Isis and Demeter.
9. See Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 122.
10. Charlene Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Mythology* (Berkeley, CA: Moon Books, 1978), pp. 103-10.
11. Sargent, *Homeric Hymns*, p. 13.
12. See C. Kerényi, *The Gods of the Greeks*, trans. Norman Cameron (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1951), pp. 45-46, 67.
13. Harrison, *Prolegomena*, p. 564.
14. Quoted by Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), p. 161.
15. H. G. Evelyn-White, *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homericica* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), pp. 288-91.
16. Harrison, *Prolegomena*, pp. 273, 548-53, 562-6.
17. Quoted by Kerényi, *Eleusis*, p. 41.
18. Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," in Edouard Schure, *The Mysteries of Ancient Greece: Orpheus, Plato* (Blauvelt, NY: Rudolf Steiner, 1971), p. 73.
19. For somewhat differing accounts of the 9 days of rituals, see Mylonas, *Eleusis*, chap. 9; Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, pp. 164-91; Harrison, *Prolegomena*, pp. 151-61.
20. See Kerényi, *Gods of the Greeks*, p. 12.
21. Schure, *Mysteries of Ancient Greece*, p. 111.
22. Quoted by Trapp, "Eleusinian and Dionysian Mysteries" (Cicero, *The Lotus*, 2.36).
23. This essay is a shortened and revised version of my article, "The Eleusinian Mysteries of Demeter and Persephone: Fertility, Sexuality and Rebirth," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 4 (no. 1: Spring 1988).