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Mythology

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Inanna/Demeter: Journey to Hell

Every civilization of the world has or has once had a god or gods. For the purpose of the paper, we will be focusing on the Sumerian and Greek Myths. More specifically Inanna (Sumerian) and Demeter (Greek), and both of their journey to hell. Both of the stories deal with motherhood, marriage, divine diplomacy, and the very limitations that gods have when it comes to the rules of the underworld. Inanna and Demeter are both goddess of fertility, true. However the motives of entering the underworld, and how the conflicts resolve are very different. Really the only thing in common other than minor similarities is the limitations of the gods and the importance of order in the universe.

In Sumerian myth, there aren't as many gods and they are not as incestuist. Inanna really is the counterpart to most of the Greek goddesses. She is the Sumerian goddess of fertility, motherhood, sexuality, etc. Though mostly similar to Aphrodite, she has the same domain of the universe as Demeter too. Demeter is the sister of Zeus, and is the goddess of motherhood and fertility. So they are both the divinity of motherhood, but once again that's really where their similarities stop. Demeter isn't married like Inanna is, and in fact Demeter's sole offspring, Persephone, is from Demeter mating with her brother Zeus.

Now the stories of these goddesses journeying to the underworld are quite different from each other. Now I was mistaken earlier when I said that fertility was where the similarities stop. Both goddesses are related to the divinities that reign over hell. Inanna's sister Ereshkigal is the queen of the underworld, and Demeter's brother Hades is the king of the underworld. However, the reasons why each of the goddesses go to the underworld is different. Inanna's motive for traveling to the underworld is very ambiguous. In 1983, Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer wrote an English translation of Inanna's poems from the ancient texts. "*She placed the shugurra, the crown of the steppe, on her head. She arranged the dark locks of hair across her forehead. She tied the small lapis beads around her neck, let the double strand of beads fall to her breast, and wrapped the royal robe around her body. She daubed her eyes with ointment called 'Let him come, Let him come,' bound the breastplate called 'Come, man, come!' around her chest, slipped the gold ring over her wrist, and took the lapis measuring rod and line in her hand.*" (Wolkstein, Kramer, 1983) According to the poem, Inanna is prepared for the journey and then some. Her motive never explained but we know that she has equipped herself with everything she needs to enter and exit the underworld. She even goes as far as to give her servants instructions in case she does not return. "*She spoke to her saying: 'Ninshubur, my constant support, if I do not return, set up a lament for me by the ruins. Beat the drum for me in the assembly places. Tear at your eyes, at your mouth, at your thighs...[and go to the temples of my fathers to ask for help].'*" (Wolkstein, Kramer, 1983) You could speculate that Inanna is preparing to battle her sister in the underworld, but then again maybe she is just being cautious seeing how her sister and her don't really have a great relationship together. She then goes to enter the door of hell, but her sister (Ereshkigal) will not allow her to do so unless she removes

all of her garments that give her power. She ends up doing so and reaches the throne room of her sister's, drained of all her power. *"Naked and bowed low, Inanna entered the throne room.*

Ereshkigal rose from her throne. Inanna started toward the throne. The Annuana, the judges of the underworld, surrounded her. They passed judgment against her." (Wolkstein, Kramer, 1983)

So Inanna is basically left barren and powerless, and then there is an altercation. Apparently Inanna tries to attack Ereshkigal, which would support the idea that maybe Inanna's motive for entering hell was to fight her sister, but Ereshkigal beats her easily. *"Then Ereshkigal*

fastened on Inanna the eye of death. She spoke against her the word of wrath. She uttered against her the cry of guilt. She struck her. Inanna was turned into a corpse, a piece of rotting meat, and was hung from a hook on the wall." (Wolkstein, Kramer, 1983) So then Ereshkigal

turns Inanna into a husk of meat and hangs her on the wall like a sadistic trophy. How Inanna is released is basically having someone else take her place which ends up being Dimuzi, Inanna's husband, as punishment for his lack of grieving at Inanna being trapped in the underworld.

Now Demeter's motive for going to the underworld isn't ambiguous at all. She has a clear reason and mission. Diane J. Rayor translated the original text for the Hymn of Demeter which told the tale of Demeter's quest into the underworld. *"None of the immortal gods or mortal folk//heard her cry, nor the Olive shining with fruit- except the daughter of Perses, tender-hearted/ Hekate, veiled in light, heard from her cave//and Lord Helios Hyperion's shining son heard the girl calling to her father, son of Kronos. Zeus sat far away from the gods, in his temple echoing with prayers, accepting rich offerings from mortals. But her father's brother, Kronos' son of many names,// Lord of the Dead, stole the unwilling girl"* (Rayor, 1998)

Demeter's daughter Persephone is kidnapped by her uncle Hades, with solemn approval from her

father/uncle Zeus. “Nine days Divine Demeter wandered// the earth, blazing torches in her hands,//nor did she eat ambrosia or sip sweet nectar once while grieving, or wash her skin dean.”

(Rayor, 1998) Demeter basically searches frantically searches for Persephone, she even keeps any crops from growing as way of punishing the humans and Gods into tell her where her daughter has gone. Eventually, she learns that Hades had taken Persephone to the underworld.

“Then, furious at Zeus who darkens clouds,// she withdrew from the assembly of gods and high Olympos and wandered the cities and rich fields of humans, disguising her form for a long time.

Nor did any man//or woman recognize her when they looked,// until she came to the house of thoughtful Keleos,// who then was ruler of incense-offering Eleusis.// She sat near the road, her heart sorrowing,//by Maiden Well where townsfolk drew water,//an olive tree spreading shade above her;//she looked like an old woman born long ago,//without a child or gifts of

garland-loving Aphrodite,//like a nurse for the children of a righteous king//or a housekeeper in the king's echoing palace.” (Rayor, 1998) Demeter understandably gets angry at Zeus for

allowing Hades to steal her daughter. She then travels to the underworld to retrieve Persephone.

When they exit, she inquires on whether Persephone consumed any food that was in the underworld. Apparently, Persephone was forced to eat food which now makes her belong in the underworld. Eventually, they realize the best thing for Persephone is to marry Hades and become the queen of the underworld.

Granted these tales have a few similarities, but they are mostly different. The motives are completely different. Demeter’s motive is the retrieval of her daughter, while Inanna’s is a bit ambiguous but very possibly a violent one. Both goddess are able to escape the underworld and

have to sacrifice something, but Demeter has no real choice but to give up her daughter. In Inanna's case, she has to sacrifice her husband out of rage.

I think the most notable similarities are the idea that there are things even gods can't do. There are certain rules for both of the renditions of the underworld that the gods have to adhere to. The gods have limitations on what they can do. Inanna, though a powerful goddess, is unable to leave underworld without her garments of power. She is also unable to enter the underworld without Ereshkigal's approval. Demeter can wreak havoc on the earth's crops, but can not keep her daughter out of the underworld because Persephone ate food from the underworld. I would say that seeing these limitations is a very sombering experience. I would say that it's to teach the humans who read these text the importance and power of order. There are multiple gods, and if they all had the same powers and capabilities then it would be chaos. That's the underlying similarity in both these myths. The concept and importance of order and laws that even gods have to live by for the universe to survive.

Works Cited

Rayor, Diane. "Homer's Hymn to Demeter." Grand Valley State University, n.d. Web. 1998.

Wolkstein, Diane, Samuel Noah Kramer, and Elizabeth Williams-Forte. *Inanna*. New York: Harper & Row, 1983. Print