

## The Old Women of Ancient Greece and the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*\*

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Scholarship of the last decade or so on old women in ancient Greece has sketched a bleak picture.<sup>1</sup> Bremmer's influential account is the bluntest and most unremittingly negative: "Women existed in order to serve the males, whether for sexual pleasure or for the higher interest of producing an heir. An old woman resembled an object that has passed its usefulness and could now be discarded" (Bremmer 203). He goes on to say, "in ancient Greece old women constituted a marginal category, which was loathed and feared by the males" (Bremmer 204).

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<sup>1</sup>An important exception is Henderson's article on older women in Attic old comedy, which presents a more complex view (Henderson 1987, see esp. 107–17). But his article has not had nearly the influence of the more negative accounts. Moreover, though it certainly provides a valuable counterpoint to Bremmer *et al.*, it over-generalizes somewhat in the opposite direction in arguing that Aristophanes consistently chose older women as leaders and "spokesmen [*sic*]" (108). This ignores the example of Praxagora in the *Ecclesiazusae* and compels him to ally Lysistrata with the older women, something that is far from clear from the text, where, at least initially, she appears as the leader and apparent contemporary of the younger women. She is, moreover, nowhere addressed in a way that would suggest advanced age. In fact, her neighbor addresses her as *teknon* (*Lys.* 8), an unlikely endearment for an older woman. Karydas' recent study of the aged nurse figure in Greek literature, though containing valuable insights with important implications for Greek attitudes toward old women (see below), is somewhat weakened by a similar tendency to be overly optimistic. Thus she does not distinguish adequately between the kind of moral authority granted to Eurycleia in the *Odyssey* (who is allied with the males of the household) and the merely persuasive power and influence of the nurse in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, who is dangerously loyal to Phaedra alone. See also Mattioli for a collection of discussions that offer more varied viewpoints, although much of the material on old women, in particular, remains surprisingly dependent upon Bremmer.

But even Falkner, who offers a more complex picture and a nuanced reading of the literary evidence available, accepts the generally negative image detailed by Bremmer as the cultural norm, speaking of “the predicament of the aged and aging women in Greece” and of “the negative and detrimental effects of age on her identity in the terms in which her culture defines it: maternal, domestic, sexual, and erotic” (Falkner 75, see also 190–92).

In these discussions, Demeter’s disguise as an old woman in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* has figured repeatedly in connection with the claim that old women had greater independence of movement than young women, an independence these scholars attribute to their worthlessness as sexual and reproductive commodities. As Garland puts it, “Since women past menopause are no longer capable of supplying heirs, there was not the same need to ensure their protection as when they were of childbearing years.”<sup>2</sup> According to these scholars, what to us might seem one of the chief advantages of aging for women in ancient Greece—greater freedom of movement—actually results from lack of concern for their protection. Curiously, however, none of the scholars who cite the *Hymn* in this connection discusses the reaction of the Eleusinian maiden, Callithoe, to the old woman’s solitude nor the goddess’ lying explanation of the circumstances surrounding it. Neither speaker regards the solitary wandering of Demeter as normal behavior for old women; in fact, both treat it as unusual and inappropriate. Thus, its use by scholars to the contrary, evidence from the *Hymn* tends to weaken, rather than to strengthen, the case for old women’s freedom of movement.

Moreover, both these passages and a number of others in the *Hymn* place a much more positive value on postmenopausal women than Bremmer’s characterization of Greek social attitudes would lead us to expect. At first sight, this may not seem surprising to those familiar with the *Hymn* and scholarship surrounding it, for the *Hymn* has often been seen as offering an unusual perspective on ancient women. Moreover, the old woman of the *Hymn* is a disguised goddess, which may very well demand that she be treated with greater respect than mortal old women. Nonetheless, closer analysis of the discrepancy has important consequences for our perception of old women in ancient Greece and may incidentally affect our understanding of the *Hymn*. Above all, it reveals that the picture of old women in ancient Greece sketched by Bremmer and uncritically cited by other scholars as the norm is far too simple: that greater attention to the context of individual pieces of evidence and to such basic

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<sup>2</sup>Garland 244. See also Bremmer 192, Falkner 73–74, and Henderson 108–9 for virtually the same argument.

distinctions as class yields a far more complex picture. In particular, I will argue that the oft-repeated claim that postmenopausal women had significantly greater freedom of movement is very hard to substantiate, that old women were frequently given certain social functions that do not permit their being easily dismissed as no longer useful, and that there is a much broader range of emotional reactions to old women than Bremmer's "fear and loathing" characterization suggests. This is not to deny that negative stereotypes associated with old women are abundant in ancient Greece and that growing old was no doubt often difficult, particularly for women who were poor, sick, or alone. But that all women, regardless of their previous social status, experienced a significant drop in social value after menopause is not credible and is not supported by the evidence.

I will first look at what the *Hymn* suggests about old women's freedom of movement, their contribution to society, and general social attitudes toward them, matters that are, as the work of previous scholars has suggested, closely related. I will then look at evidence from other texts on the subject of old women's work and freedom of movement in order to establish in what respects the *Hymn* is and is not verisimilar in its characterization of the aged Dôsdô's experience. Finally, I will discuss three different ways in which the evidence of the *Hymn* might be used in giving a general evaluation of social attitudes toward old women in ancient Greece.

### I. Old Women in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*

When the four daughters of Celeus encounter the disguised Demeter at the Maiden's Well outside the city, far from accepting the fact of her solitary travelling as entirely natural for old women, they express surprise at finding her there. The eldest, Callithoe, says:

Τίς πόθεν ἔσσι γρὴν παλαιγενέων ἀνθρώπων;  
τίπτε δὲ νόσφι πόλῃος ἀπέστιχες οὐδὲ δόμοισι  
πίλνασαι; ἔνθα γυναῖκες ἀνὰ μέγαρ' αἰσκιόεντα  
τηλίκαι ὥς σὺ περ ὧδε καὶ ὀπλότεραι γεγάασιν,  
αἳ κέ σε φίλωνται ἡμὲν ἔπει ἤδ' ἐκ' ἔργῳ. (*h.Cer.* 113–17)

Who and from where are you, old woman of ancient-born peoples?  
Why ever did you go out away from the city and why do you not  
draw near the houses? There are women in the shadowy halls,  
both those of the same age as you are and younger,  
who would treat you as a friend both in word and in deed.

The girl treats the old woman's travelling outside the city as peculiar, requiring explanation, and sees the city and the house as the appropriate spot for old

women. Callithoe's surprise accompanies apparent concern for the old woman's well-being, as she also, rather sweetly, conjures up a community of women, both young and old, ready to welcome and tend the old woman, though she is a complete stranger. Callithoe's words are thus very much at odds with the dominant social attitudes toward old women attributed to the ancient Greeks by Bremmer, Falkner, and Garland. She does not accept the old woman's solitary travel as normal, and she certainly does not receive her with the fear and loathing Bremmer ascribes to Greek males.

Parker would make the girl's sympathetic reception of Dôsdô represent the exceptional quality of the Eleusinians' hospitality. Citing Bremmer, he says, "Elderly lady though she is, and thus a person in Greek terms of the lowest possible value, the disguised Demeter is received with notable graciousness, and the household of Celeus passes the famous 'entertaining a god in disguise' test with flying colours" (8–9). But, as Parker goes on to note, the motif of Eleusinian hospitality that is important in other versions of the myth has little function in this version.<sup>3</sup> Demeter makes no grateful gift of agriculture to the Eleusinians, as in the Attic/Eleusinian version of the myth (cf. Richardson 81 and 174 *ad* 75ff. on various other versions of the myth that give much greater credit to local inhabitants); she gives them the Mysteries only after the intervening episode of Demophoôn, which does not elicit her gratitude but her anger. Nor is there mention of Demeter's gratitude anywhere in the *Hymn*. In fact, as Foley (100–103) correctly observes, the cult at Eleusis seems to be founded to appease the angry goddess, the gift of the Mysteries to come from the goddess's generosity rather than mortal desert. Indeed, Demeter's angry words at lines 256–57 suggest that her encounter with the Eleusinians has demonstrated primarily that mortals are *not* deserving (Νήιδες ἄνθρωποι καὶ ἀφράδμονες οὐτ' ἀγαθοῖο / αἴσαν ἐπερχομένου προγνώμεναι οὔτε κακοῖο). Moreover, as we shall see, the *Hymn* seems stubbornly to insist on a positive value to the old woman and on her usefulness to the house of Celeus rather than on the Eleusinians' generosity. Thus, although the *Hymn* makes use of a traditional story-pattern in which a disguised divinity comes to a house to test human generosity, it alters that story in several significant ways. The disguised goddess does not come to the house seeking hospitality but is encountered outside the walls of the city. She is not brought into the house as a guest, but as a paid servant, and the *Hymn* does not make gratitude an explicit theme of the work.

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<sup>3</sup>Parker 9. See also the detailed discussion of Foley 40–41 on lines 90–97 and 99–100, 102, 177. She makes clear the relative unimportance of the theme of hospitality in the *Hymn*'s version of the story, compared to the Attic/Eleusinian one.

In justifying her presence at the well, Demeter offers an elaborate lie (*h. Cer.* 122–32), which involves abduction by pirates and a lucky escape. She begins by asserting explicitly and strongly that she has come against her will (ἤλυθον οὐκ ἐθέλουσα, βίη δ' ἀέκουσαν ἀνάγκη / ἄνδρες ληιστῆρες ἀπήγαγον, 124–25). Her account thus further undermines the notion that her case supports greater independence of movement for old women, as it is only an unfortunate and undesired circumstance that has led to her wandering. And it certainly does not support the contention that old women could move about “without fear for their safety” (Falkner 74). Moreover, when she speaks of being sold in line 132, Demeter envisions a positive value (τιμή) to the old woman. Though commanding a price in a slave’s market does not confer social status, it does suggest that older women were seen as having a capacity for work that made them a potential commodity, not automatically subject to discard. That is, despite the absence of sexual and reproductive functions (we are told she is γρηὶ παλαιγενεὶ ἐναλὶγκίος, ἥ τε τόκοιο / εἴργηται δώρων τε φιλοστεφάνου Ἀφροδίτης, 101–2), this old woman at least does not present herself as an object that has outlived its usefulness, entirely without social purpose.

It is, of course, hard to know how plausible a Greek audience would find Demeter’s lie. The poet may here be interested more in suggesting Demeter’s identification with her abducted daughter than in verisimilitude.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the resemblance of Demeter’s story to certain details in Odysseus’ lies and to features of Eumaeus’ experience may make us wonder how carefully the poet has considered the gender and age of the speaker in composing the lie.<sup>5</sup> In the final lines of the lie, however, Demeter details precisely the kind of work one might expect to get from such an old woman, giving a good indication of her value that tallies well with what we know of the social realia:

προφρονέως φίλα τέκνα τέων πρὸς δώμαθ' ἴκωμαι  
 ἀνέρος ἡδὲ γυναικός, ἵνα σφίσιν ἐργάζωμαι  
 πρόφρων οἷα γυναικὸς ἀφῆλικος ἔργα τέτυκται·  
 καὶ κεν παῖδα νεογνὸν ἐν ἀγκοίνῃσιν ἔχουσα

<sup>4</sup>For the suggestion that the abduction is intended to suggest a parallel between Demeter and her daughter, see Clay 228. A detail from Menander’s *Sicyonius* throws the verisimilitude of Demeter’s lie into some question: pirates who come upon a child, a slave, and an old woman on the shore leave the old woman behind, because it does not seem to them profitable to take her along (3–5). The detail is essential to Menander’s plot, but, particularly given Menander’s ancient reputation for being especially true to life, may well be more credible than Demeter’s account.

<sup>5</sup>See Richardson on lines 120, 123, 125 for discussion of parallels with Odysseus’ Cretan tales.

καλὰ τιθηνοίμην καὶ δώματα τηρήσαιμι  
καὶ κε λέχος στορέσαιμι μυχῶ θαλάμων ἐυπήκτων  
δεσπόσυνον καὶ κ' ἔργα διδασκῆσαιμι γυναῖκας. (*h. Cer.* 138–44)

Eagerly I would come to someone's house, dear children,  
either man's or woman's, so that I might willingly perform for them  
the sorts of task appropriate for an elderly woman:  
I could hold a newborn child in my arms and tend it well  
and watch over the house and I could make up the master bed in the recess  
of the well-built chamber and I could teach the women their tasks.

Thus, although her sexual and reproductive functions have expired, her domestic and pedagogical ones have not. Indeed, her claim to be able to teach others suggests that her potential to make contributions to the household may have been enhanced by age and experience.<sup>6</sup> The social role of *trophos* (as opposed to *tittheus*, usually used more specifically of a wet nurse)<sup>7</sup> is typically given to old women in art and literature and is explicitly associated with them by the *Hymn* (*h. Cer.* 103–4). Presumably, old women's experience with children makes up for their inability to lactate.<sup>8</sup> Demeter's desire to immortalize a mortal child (possibly to avenge herself on Hades by "stealing" a mortal from Death)<sup>9</sup> thus seems to provide a plausible enough explanation for Demeter's choice of disguise, for the role of nurse seems one of the easiest ways for an outsider to gain access to a child.

<sup>6</sup>The reading διδασκῆσαιμι is conjectural. On the role of elderly women as teachers in the household, see *Od.* 22.422 and the discussion of Karydas 38. The passage makes clear that Eurycleia expects to get *timē* from those she oversees and teaches.

<sup>7</sup>On the distinction (not maintained universally) between *trophos* and *tittheus*, see Herfst 57–63; also Pfisterer-Haas 16. In some cases, it seems that a woman who began as a wet nurse (*tittheus*) remained in the house after menopause, when she came to serve a more ambiguous but also more elevated position as *trophos*. Eurycleia and Eurynome in the *Odyssey* are examples of women who began as wet nurses but seem to have gained an influential role in the household, primarily, it would seem, through the affection of their nurslings. Literature suggests that this is a more typical route than the route followed by Demeter.

<sup>8</sup>It is clear that Demeter does not breastfeed Demophoön. The *Hymn* says explicitly that he eats nothing nor suckles, but that Demeter anoints him with ambrosia, breathes on him, and puts him in the fire (*h. Cer.* 235–40). The references to nursing that occur in the exchanges between Dôsô and the Eleusinian women need to be taken in the more general sense, as caring for a child, given the *Hymn*'s explicit statement concerning her age.

<sup>9</sup>See Clay 226 and text cited there (n. 75) for an interesting discussion of Demeter's motivation. Parker dismisses the issue of Demeter's motivation as irrelevant.

The enthusiastic response of Callidice, the most beautiful of the daughters, again assures the old woman of a warm reception by the women of Eleusis, due more, it seems here, to the personal attributes of the old woman herself than to an indiscriminate kindness on their part. After listing the wives of prominent men of Eleusis, she says:

τάων οὐκ ἂν τίς σε κατὰ πρῶτιστον ὀπωπὴν  
εἶδος ἀτιμήσασα δόμων ἀπονοσφίσσειεν,  
ἀλλὰ σε δέξονται· δὴ γὰρ θεοεἰκελὸς ἐσσι. (*h.Cer.* 157–59)

No one of these women upon first seeing you  
would turn you away from her home dishonoring your appearance,  
but they will receive you. For indeed you are like a goddess.

She then goes on to invite Dōsō to her own house to tend her newborn brother. Her words here indicate a high value placed on the nursing that the old woman can provide:

εἰ τὸν γ' ἐκθρέψαιο καὶ ἥβης μέτρον ἴκοιτο  
ρεῖά κέ τίς σε ἰδοῦσα γυναικῶν θηλυτεράων  
ζηλώσαι· τόσα κέν τοι ἀπὸ θρεπτήρια δοίη. (*h.Cer.* 166–68)

If you would bring him up and he should come to the measure of youth  
any female woman upon seeing you would easily  
be envious, so great a return for rearing him would she give you.

Her mother Metaneira concurs. Having heard her daughters' reports, she tells them to return quickly to the Well and to offer Dōsō a "boundless" (ἄπειρων) wage (*h.Cer.* 173). She later echoes her daughter's words in offering Dōsō an enviable return for nursing her son (*h.Cer.* 221–23). The women's words make clear not only that they value the child-care the old woman can provide but are willing to pay handsomely for it. Moreover, this discussion of wages and work does not produce the impression of an entirely disinterested hospitality on the part of the women of Eleusis.<sup>10</sup>

In her negotiations with Metaneira, Demeter lays claim to other skills associated with women that are likely to be enhanced with age and experience:

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<sup>10</sup>We might accept it as a highly courteous and oblique way of extending charity, but there is no indication of this in the text. Moreover, the conventions of hospitality we know from the *Odyssey*, where hosts provide generously before learning anything of the visitor's circumstances, suggest that hospitality could be freely offered without in any way insulting the recipient. In such a social context, there seems to be little need for such elaborate pretense.

θρέψω, κοῦ μιν ἔολπα κακοφραδίῃσι τιθήνης  
 οὔτ' ἄρ' ἐπηλυσίῃ δηλήσεται οὔθ' ὑποταμόν·  
 οἶδα γὰρ ἀντίτομον μέγα φέρτερον ὕλοτόμοιο,  
 οἶδα δ' ἐπηλυσίῃς πολυπήμονος ἐσθλὸν ἐρυσμόν. (*h.Cer.* 227–30)

I will bring him up, and I do not fear for him due to the ill-will of a nursemaid,  
 nor will a bewitchment harm him nor a magic herb.  
 For I know a very strong antidote to the wood-cut plant,  
 and I know a fine defense against the bewitchment that brings great pain.

As Lucia Nixon has pointed out, the *Hymn* here gives positive associations to the old woman's knowledge of plant lore in contrast to the more familiar negative ones associated with such younger and more dangerous figures as Medea and Circe (Nixon 85–88).<sup>11</sup> In other contexts, old women's knowledge of herbs and potions is associated with malevolent witchcraft, but in the *Hymn* such knowledge has entirely beneficent effects. Likewise, the figure of Iambe, elsewhere identified as an old woman, whose words and behavior in other versions of the myth are explicitly sexual, behaves and speaks with entirely epic decorum in her brief appearance in the *Hymn* (see Foley 45–46 on various versions of the Iambe/Baubo figure). She is moreover described as κέδν' εἰδυῖα (*h.Cer.* 195), a phrase used elsewhere in early epic only of Penelope and Eurycleia, quite respectable company (see Karydas 8–63 on Eurycleia). Assuming that the Greek audience knew Iambe as an old woman (the *Hymn* does not, in fact, mention Iambe's age, which does raise the possibility that it was too unflattering to mention, as well as the possibility that she was not always identified as elderly), the *Hymn* provides another example of an old woman portrayed in a dignified and sympathetic manner.

In general, then, the *Hymn to Demeter* does not support the notion that old women, lacking a real social value, could travel about freely without concern for their safety. The old woman Dôsô is travelling precisely because she is a desirable commodity; she has been captured and must flee from pirates seeking to sell her. Her solitude occasions surprise; Callithoe comments that the old woman belongs more properly in a house being tended by others rather than by herself outside the city. The disguised goddess describes the work she can do, work associated with old women outside the *Hymn*, in positive terms. The

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<sup>11</sup>Dôsô departs from another common negative stereotype associated with old women, their propensity for drunkenness, when she rejects Metaneira's offer of wine (*h.Cer.* 206–10). This incident is, however, probably most significant as an *aition* for practices in the cult worship of Demeter. In any case, the association of old women with drunkenness only emerges in the classical period (see Bremmer 201–2).

women of the house of Celeus place a high value on that work and on the old woman herself, due at least in part to her exceptional appearance. Negative associations surrounding old women in other contexts are denied in the *Hymn*.

How then should we fit this evidence into the larger picture of what we know about the social status of, and cultural attitudes toward, postmenopausal women in ancient Greece?

## II. Old Women's Work, Old Women's "Freedom" of Movement

Before proceeding further, I want to make a distinction between issues of description (verisimilitude) and issues of prescription or value (ideology). This distinction is admittedly imperfect, as theorists have constantly reminded us that no description is entirely value-free or non-ideological. Indeed, in this instance too description will turn out to have significance for ideology. Nonetheless, though the distinction is not perfect, for my purposes here it will be useful to divide into two parts the material of the *Hymn* concerning old women: first, that which appears to correspond to actual social practice (is verisimilar); second, that which lacks a verifiable connection to social practice but nonetheless implies a certain evaluation of old women. Because representations of doubtful verisimilitude may still have ideological force, verisimilitude is not the only issue we need to consider when looking at the relevance of the *Hymn* for the lives of old women in antiquity.

Although the *Hymn* is clearly not verisimilar in all ways, it does provide testimony on two matters that can, I think, be verified against the broader picture available to us: evidence for the kind of work performed by old women and for old women's freedom of movement. As said above, Dôso's description of the work she might do for the Eleusinian women tallies well with what we know of old women's work from other sources. Uncontroversial indeed is the association of old women with child-care; uncontroversial too is their association with domestic work of the sort Dôso describes—housekeeping, bed-making, and overseeing servants—and with herbal remedies. More debatable, of course, is whether this work was given anything like the positive value placed on it in the *Hymn*, but I will consider issues of value in my later discussions of ideology. To the extent that it describes work associated with old women, the *Hymn* is verisimilar.

Much more difficult is the question of old women's "freedom" of movement, which raises issues of verisimilitude and ideology that cannot be easily separated. The conventional scholarly view holds that younger women were restricted in their movements outside the house primarily due to concerns

over the paternity of their children. If this is the case, it is reasonable to assume that when women were beyond childbearing age they would be free to travel about.<sup>12</sup>

This view gains considerable support from a remark attributed to the Attic orator Hyperides (fr. 205 Jensen): δεῖ τὴν ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας ἐκπορευομένην ἐν τοιαύτῃ καταστάσει εἶναι τῆς ἡλικίας, ὥστε τοὺς ἀπαντῶντας πυνθάνεσθαι, μὴ τίνος ἐστὶ γυνή, ἀλλὰ τίνος μήτηρ. Implicit in the remark, for which we unfortunately lack a specific context, seems to be precisely the sense required: that, because older women were unlikely to occasion the same kind of speculation as younger, their independent movements outside the house were regarded more favorably. The quotation is indeed strong evidence. And yet Hyperides here is giving a prescription (δεῖ τὴν ἐκ τῆς οἰκίας ἐκπορευομένην) rather than a description; Cohen rightly calls attention to the difference between the social ideology governing women's behavior and the actual practices of women in Athenian society.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Hyperides' pronouncement comes from a forensic speech, possibly the prosecution of his own ex-mistress, but is not in any case spoken by an entirely objective and impartial witness to the Athenian social scene. Indeed, lacking a more specific context for the remark, we should be hesitant to found too much on it. As I have argued above, when we examine closely its context in the *Hymn*, Demeter's disguise as an old woman has an entirely different significance from the one it has conventionally been given in scholarship on old women. Dōsō's travel is treated as a sign not of her liberation from the house, but of an unsafe, undesired, and undesirable solitude. Indeed, Callithoe in the *Hymn* seems to offer a prescription quite different from

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<sup>12</sup>Gutmann (1975, 1976, 1977) has argued for a universal model of female aging according to which "women reverse the order of male aging...women start from passive mastery—characterized by dependence on and deference to her husband—but move in later life to active mastery. Across cultures and with age they seem to become more domineering, more agentic, and less willing to trade submission for security" (1977: 309). At first sight, Gutmann's model would appear to substantiate the model described here for old women's movement. But the model is neither as universal as he suggests (see Gold's study, as reported by Gutmann 1977: 311, according to which only fourteen out of twenty-six anthropologists—just slightly over half—report such a change). Moreover, most examples discussed by Gutmann suggest only that old women become more dominant within the household, *not* outside it (Gutmann 1977: 309–11). In my opinion, Gutmann's model needs further definition and substantiation if we are to apply it to the ancient Greek material.

<sup>13</sup>In fact, Cohen's article directly challenges the notion that Athenian women were secluded, and many of my citations come from his useful survey of the evidence from Athens. But Cohen does not consider age as a factor in evaluating the evidence.

that of Hyperides in suggesting that old women too belong in the house, being tended by others, rather than travelling alone outside the city walls.

If we look at specific instances of social behavior attributed to women in Greek texts, it is difficult to document a difference between the movements of old and young women. Thus, of the types of activity engaged in by old women that Bremmer and other scholars cite as examples of their greater freedom of movement, virtually all are likewise attested for women of childbearing age or are activities to which old women are compelled by economic necessity. Close examination of the evidence suggests that, when social status and context are taken into consideration, there is very little distinction between the kinds of movement actually engaged in by old women and young.

Accordingly, young women of the privileged classes, as well as old, are seen attending funerals, both private (Lys. 1.8) and public (Th. 2.45),<sup>14</sup> going to festivals (Lys. 1.20),<sup>15</sup> gathering in the streets (Ar. *Ec.* 1–310, Lys. 1–253,<sup>16</sup> Th. 792), visiting male relatives in prison (Lys. 13.39–41, And. 1.48), attending women's parties (Ar. *Ec.* 348–50, Lys. 700–702, Th. 795), visiting neighbors (Men. *Sam.* 35–38, Herod. *Mim.* 6, Theoc. 15),<sup>17</sup> and, of course, going to the well (*h.Cer.* 105–7). Most, but not all, of these activities are single-sex, but funerals and some festivals are places where men and young women might meet

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<sup>14</sup>Pericles addresses the widows of the dead, making it clear that they were present at this very public event. As widows of those being honored, they are by definition at the stage of life at which they will be recognized as someone's wife rather than his mother.

<sup>15</sup>Bremmer cites D. 18.258 to suggest old women's proclivity for festivals, particularly for what Bremmer calls "the new 'oriental religions'" (194), but the opening of the *Lysistrata* suggests that women of all ages were associated with untraditional and foreign religious celebrations, particularly of the ecstatic kind (see also Ar. *Lys.* 387–97.)

<sup>16</sup>As Henderson comments, "the women's freedom to leave their house is assumed, but...they must be sure that their husbands have no reason to deny permission" (1996: 209 n. 29). This seems a more accurate characterization of the kind of restrictions on women in Athens.

<sup>17</sup>Since most scholars now seem to accept that all women traveled more freely during the Hellenistic period than before (see Fantham *et al.*, esp. 140–44), I will not discuss later examples in any detail. Bremmer (195) gives the old woman visitor in Herod. *Mim.* 1 as another example of old women's freedom of movement. Not only is this woman far from respectable, however, but the woman visitor in Herod. *Mim.* 6, apparently younger, has the same freedom to visit (see also Theoc. 15). Menander's *Samia* 35–38 describes frequent reciprocal visits between neighbor women; one is a foreign woman of childbearing age, one a young citizen woman of childbearing age, the third her mother. In the *Dyscolus*, in a country setting, a young and unmarried woman ventures outside unaccompanied several times.

(as they do in Lysias 1, the *Hippolytus* and the *Samia*). The evidence thus suggests that there were any number of opportunities for young women to travel outside the house to enjoy social contact with others, particularly with other women. The parabasis of the *Thesmophoriazusae* makes clear the tension between the stated ideology and the actual practice. For this begins by saying that husbands forbid their wives to leave the house (790), but only two lines later speaks of wives going outdoors (792) and falling asleep at friends' houses, worn out from celebrating (795), as though these were common occurrences. Moreover, the entire *Thesmophoriazusae* describes a regularly occurring event at Athens, the Thesmophoria, which all Athenian women of citizen status were expected to attend. Clearly, "forbidding their wives to leave the house" either is an overstatement or has a different meaning in the context from the one we might be inclined to give it.

None of the activities previously mentioned can properly be characterized as solitary, but, in at least some cases, women of childbearing age appear to make their way to their destination either alone or accompanied by an unmentioned slave or other attendant (e.g., Ar. *Lys.* 1–253).<sup>18</sup> Presumably for relatively short stretches of travel to such events young women might, of necessity, sometimes be alone—or attended only by a slave. Solitary neighborhood errands by young upper-class women are apparently described at *Eccleziastusae* 528–29, where Praxagora, a young woman, tells her husband (falsely) that she has been assisting a neighbor in childbirth (thus, a function not limited to old women, see also Alciph. 2.7) and at *Lys.* 1.14, where the wife claims (as an explanation for the

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<sup>18</sup>Henderson (1987: 108–9) gives old women's greater freedom of movement as the reason for Euripides' and his Kinsman's disguise as old women in the *Thesmophoriazusae*. But the choice of disguise here is surely occasioned by the men's own old age (see *Th.* 63), rather than by a greater liberty given to old women; the play begins with Euripides' and Mnesilochus' attempt to enlist Agathon, who appears as a distinctly young "woman." In fact, when Agathon asks Euripides why he himself does not go to the festival to defend himself, Euripides explains that he is gray-haired while Agathon is young, pale and smooth-cheeked and thus more feminine in appearance (*Th.* 188–92). It seems to be consistently the case in Aristophanic comedy that cross-dressers preserve their age when they change their gender (thus, the young and attractive Praxagora becomes an attractive young man, *Ec.* 427). Nor does Mnesilochus in his disguise as an old woman attend the festival entirely alone, for the slave Thraitia goes with him. The issue of accompaniment by slaves needs to be carefully considered when discussing women's movement, because their presence may go unmentioned (see, for example, Herod. *Mim.* 6, where it only emerges gradually and incidentally that the woman visitor has been accompanied by a slave). In any case, attendance at festivals, and therefore presumably travel to such festivals, is well attested for women of all ages.

door's opening in the night to admit her lover) that she has gone out to get a light from her neighbors. In both cases, the false explanations are accepted by the husbands as legitimate excuses for their wives' absence from home. Interestingly, the real-life example is the reverse of the comic: while the comic husband suspects his wife (falsely) of adultery, the historical husband initially trusts and believes his wife, even though she is involved in an adulterous relationship. This may suggest that comedy exaggerates men's anxiety over their wives' chastity, as well as the restrictiveness of Athenian husbands. Although particularly in the large and impersonal, and therefore presumably more dangerous, city of Athens men may have had concerns about their wives' ventures outside the house, upper-class women, young as well as old, apparently had many legitimate reasons for travelling outside the house, although perhaps they only rarely had cause to do so entirely alone.

When we look at other types of contact between women and the world outside the house, social status becomes an important factor. Bremmer (193) argues that in fifth-century Athens only a woman past menopause (or a courtesan: see Thphr. *Char.* 28.3) might open the door to a stranger, not a decent Athenian woman pre-menopause. The passage Bremmer cites from Euripides' *Trojan Women* (194–95), in which Hecuba worries that she may soon be a nurse or a porter, does show that old women who were slaves in the household might be used as porters. But it does not demonstrate that young women who were slaves could not open the door (in fact, the testimony on courtesans suggests the reverse) nor (much more importantly) that free women of citizen birth, upon reaching menopause, began to open the door when they had not before. In fact, the queenly Hecuba is surely dismayed at having to perform this slavish function; in her own house, despite her advancing age, she presumably would not. It is impossible therefore to see this as a “freedom” attained by age. The portress in Euripides' *Helen* is likewise a slave.

The issue of class likewise arises in the case of the old woman used as messenger at Lysias 1.15 (cited by Bremmer 193). Though we are not told the social status of the old woman, it is probably low. The passage probably tells us that she needs financial assistance more than respectability. And the same oration depicts the wife's *therapaina*, apparently a younger woman, moving about quite freely in the streets of Athens (Lys. 1.8). If we are to speak of old women's greater freedom of movement, we must be certain that we are comparing women of the same social class.

Similarly, when at *Iliad* 3.386–88 Aphrodite disguises herself as an old woman in order to address Helen, issues of social class again arise, because Homer tells us that the woman is a wool-worker (3.388), thus of the menial

classes. We do not see Hecuba engaging in similar solitary movement; she is always accompanied either by her husband or by other women.

The example of Aphrodite's disguise as an old woman raises a further methodological problem that is also relevant to Demeter's in the *Hymn*. Although divine disguises may reveal certain things about social norms and perceptions, they probably should not be used as evidence on the subject of women's freedom of movement. Because the gods can appear suddenly out of nowhere (as Aphrodite apparently does in the *Iliad*) and can remain invisible to all to whom they do not wish to appear, they do not need to worry much about wearing a socially appropriate guise when en route. The social significance of their disguise becomes relevant only when actually encountering mortals. When, in the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite*, Aphrodite ambushes and seduces Anchises alone in the woods in the guise of an *admetos parthenos*, her choice of disguise probably does not tell us much about freedom of movement for *parthenoi* (acceptable in the woods but not in the city?) but reflects her broader role in the *Hymn*. Similarly, when Aphrodite, in the guise of an old woman, addresses Helen in the *Iliad*, this probably has more to do with the kind of intimacy presumed to exist between the nurse-figure and the heroine (cf. Eurynome and Penelope, Aithra and Helen) than with greater freedom of movement for old women.

Thus, though the evidence is complex and not as unequivocal as one would ideally like, I suggest that, in its presentation of Dôsô's movements as undesirable and atypical, the *Hymn* presents an ideology of feminine movement that may conform more closely to social reality than Hyperides' oft-cited remark. Privileged women of all ages have legitimate reasons to move about outside the house, but they do not typically do so alone for any extended distance. Only working class women and slaves are commonly depicted as solitary.

On two important matters concerning the lives of old women—the kind of work they are fit to do and their movements outside the house—the *Hymn* consequently does not appear to diverge radically from the picture of older women's experience represented in our other sources. Both of these are, moreover, relevant to the evaluation of old women in Greek society: the first shows that old women could still make contributions to the household in the form of work, albeit perhaps of a limited kind; the second suggests that they were not suddenly liberated from the household due to lack of concern for their protection.

### III. The Evaluation of Old Women in Ancient Greece

Nonetheless, though the features of old women's existence discussed in the previous section do cast some doubt on Bremmer's strong claim that old women were seen as so valueless that they might be discarded without qualm, neither

feature necessarily entails a positive evaluation of old women in Greek antiquity. Certainly, there is quite a step between recognizing that old women performed certain household tasks and seeing those tasks as highly valuable and praiseworthy. The task of nurse was one that might be performed by a slave; assuredly, it did not bring anything like the enviable ἀπείρων μίσθος promised by Metaneira to Dôsô. Thus, though the social function the *Hymn* gives to the aged Dôsô is verisimilar, we can not conclude that the enthusiasm with which the women of the house of Celeus receive her represents a common reaction to old women in ancient Greece.

In fact, there are two reasons that we might dismiss the *Hymn*'s more positive evaluation of old women as anomalous, or at least as a departure from the standard Greek male attitude described by Bremmer. The first, as I have already suggested, is the characterization of the *Hymn* in the most influential recent scholarship, which tends to suggest that it has somehow managed to enter into the female consciousness better than other Greek texts do or at the very least is a better representative of ancient women and their concerns than are most other Greek texts.<sup>19</sup> And Bremmer acknowledges that women's attitudes toward old women were probably different from the dominant male attitudes. All of the conversation described above takes place in an exclusively feminine realm apart from men. Are we somehow being given access to a distinct world of feminine experience otherwise accessible only through the words of Sappho and a handful of others? The *Hymn* would then provide another source besides Sappho for a feminine perspective on the experience and evaluation of old age, one which is strikingly more positive than the male ones analyzed by Bremmer.<sup>20</sup> Conceivably, women would be more sympathetic to older women in anticipation of their own experience. They are also positioned better than are men to appreciate the kinds of domestic and child-rearing tasks performed by old women.

If, however, we are going to treat the *Hymn* as anomalous, representing a feminine point of view distinct from the dominant male one, it seems essential to explain how a traditional *Hymn* has come to preserve uncritically such an unusual perspective.<sup>21</sup> In her discussion of the production and reception of

<sup>19</sup>See, e.g., Foley, esp. xi–xii. Also Arthur in Foley 216 and *passim*.

<sup>20</sup>See Falkner 71–107 for a wonderful discussion of aging in Sappho's poetry.

<sup>21</sup>The question of whether a distinct feminine voice can occur in poetry created by men is complex. For arguments that traditional male poetry can represent women's voices accurately, see Zweig and bibliography cited there. Although it does seem to me that such representation is at least possible, we might expect to see these distinctly feminine views treated somewhat critically by the narrator if such views were clearly at odds with traditional male ideology. Conversely, if the feminine perspective on old women can be

Sappho's poetry, Marilyn Skinner makes the intriguing suggestion that Sappho and other women poets were "part of a widespread female oral tradition handed down from mother to daughter" and that their poetry therefore was able to reproduce genuinely and distinctly feminine points of view (Skinner 131–38). Is it possible that the *Hymn*, which at the very least bears some marks of oral origins,<sup>22</sup> derives from such a separate and distinct female oral tradition? Though most scholars have seen an essential connection between the *Hymn* and the Eleusinian Mysteries, which demands that the *Hymn* have equal relevance for men, Kevin Clinton has argued, based on the iconography of the Mysteries and themes in the *Hymn*, that it should instead be connected with the exclusively feminine celebration of the Thesmophoria. And it is precisely at such gatherings as the Thesmophoria that Skinner imagines Greek women propagating and disseminating their separate women's ways of speaking. Still, although Clinton is right that certain features of the *Hymn* such as Iambe's joking with Demeter are more appropriately connected with the Thesmophoria, he seems to me to go too far in downplaying connections between the *Hymn* and the Eleusinian Mysteries discussed by other scholars. It is therefore perhaps safer to say that the *Hymn* should not be associated exclusively with a single festival to Demeter, but reflects the worship of Demeter more broadly. Nonetheless, without an exclusive or primary connection to the Mysteries, it becomes somewhat more plausible that the *Hymn* was produced primarily by and for women in connection with their worship of Demeter.

Unfortunately, apart from its being so much about women, there is really very little evidence that would connect the *Hymn* to women specifically. The attribution of the *Hymn* in antiquity to Homer, though poorly attested (the *Hymn to Demeter* occurs in only one manuscript of the *Homeric Hymns*), suggests that the ancients did not consider it a feminine creation or possession, unlike Sappho's poetry. The *Hymn*'s language and metre, its use of typical scenes, epic themes, and story-patterns, all place it more clearly in the tradition of Homeric and Hesiodic poetry than is Sappho's, which presents many more departures from, and far more explicit challenges to, the Homeric tradition<sup>23</sup> (though see Richardson 337, who notes enough peculiarities in the *Hymn*, particularly in its fondness for necessary enjambement, to suggest that it belongs "to a different

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entertained by both traditional narrator and audience, if both can "identify" to that extent with the women of the poem, then it is hard to accept that a univocal dominant ideology of fear and loathing toward old women exists in the culture.

<sup>22</sup>On the orality of the *Hymn*, see Richardson 30–31 and Appendix 2, 331–38.

<sup>23</sup>On the traditional language of the *Hymn*, see Richardson, esp. 30–56; on traditional story-patterns, see Lord; on traditional themes, see Segal.

branch of the epic tradition"). Without more evidence for women composers or performers of hexameter verse in the epic tradition, the suggestion that the *Hymn* is a specifically feminine creation or possession can only be tentative.<sup>24</sup>

Another, perhaps more serious, problem with regarding the *Hymn* as an ideological anomaly with more favorable attitudes toward women in general and old women in particular is that this depends on women's identifying closely with the experience of the divine mother and her daughter while paying relatively little attention to the role of mortal women in the *Hymn*. Though Demeter's experience as a mother does seem to bring her closer to mortal women than are virgin goddesses like Athene and Hecate, feminist scholarship on these goddesses has offered good reasons for drawing firm distinctions between Greek male attitudes toward female divinities and toward mortal women.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, it is precisely Demeter's status as a goddess that may lead a different group of scholars to doubt the relevance of the *Hymn* as evidence for cultural attitudes toward old women in ancient Greece, for her divinity alone may create the positive associations which would then have little relevance for real old women. Certainly, there are strong indications in the women's words and actions that they perceive that Dôsô is no ordinary old woman. Although the *Hymn* informs us that they do not know she is a goddess, they clearly perceive a quality in her that marks her as superior. Callidice calls her godlike (*h.Cer.* 159); Metaneira's initial response is as to a divine epiphany (*h.Cer.* 190); and her words too call attention to the old woman's superior appearance (*h.Cer.* 213–15). In any case, the poet's own awareness of Dôsô's true identity as a goddess in disguise may be sufficient to explain the unusually sympathetic treatment of an old woman in an ancient text and the correspondingly high value placed on the kind of work she can do. Such lines as αἶ κέ σε φίλωνται ἡμὲν ἔπει ἡδὲ καὶ ἔργῳ (117) then resonate with an appropriateness unintended by their speakers in the poem, suggesting not so much a sympathetic and welcoming feminine world as the relationship of worshippers to their goddess. They can tell us little about the experience of real old women in Greece.

In fact, if this is the correct interpretation of the anomaly, the *Hymn*, far from providing a specifically feminine perspective on old age, actually may

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<sup>24</sup>Stehle, in her study of performance and gender in early Greek poetry, clearly associates the other *Homeric Hymns* with bardic and therefore male performance (see Stehle 177–99), although she declines to discuss the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* due to the uncertainty over its performance context.

<sup>25</sup>See especially Murnaghan and Zeitlin 1995.

provide an example of a misogynistic<sup>26</sup> strategy noted by Zeitlin (1995) in her analysis of another divine *kourotrophos*, Hecate in the *Theogony*, a strategy which “displaces the undeniable powers of the female upward to the gods, allowing for the ‘deification’ of the female and female attributes, while repressing any validating alternatives to the mortal woman. Zeus adopts and empowers femininity in the person of the goddess Hecate, who assists men in all their undertakings, and who supports generational survival among mortals by sponsoring the growth of children apart from actual maternity” (Zeitlin 1995: 69–70). In both the *Theogony* and the *Hymn*, the positive attributes of femininity represented by the nurturing goddesses are contrasted with their negative results for men when embodied in mortal women: Pandora in the *Theogony*, Metaneira in the *Hymn*. For just as Pandora’s curiosity results in the release of all kinds of evils for mortals, Metaneira’s unfortunate interference is responsible for Demophoön’s failure to obtain immortality. And, as Parker comments (9–10), this episode seems to explain why Demeter, for all her generosity to humans, does not give them a blissful immortality. For her gift of the Mysteries, however welcome, might well be judged inferior to the gift of immortality her nurturing could confer.<sup>27</sup> Like the myths of Eve and Pandora, it puts the responsibility for man’s failure to obtain immortality and for his rupture with the divine on a mortal woman. Though the *Hymn* is certainly not as overtly critical of Metaneira as the *Theogony* is of Pandora, Demeter’s angry words at lines 256–58 make her and her folly (ἄφροαδίη) responsible for the unfortunate result, a judgment apparently shared by the narrator (*h.Cer.* 243, see also 246). It seems a little unfair that Metaneira should be attacked and accused of thoughtlessness for what appears to be a genuine and understandable concern for her child. The episode seems to have a more symbolic significance: the “nurturing” offered by the real, mortal mother interferes with the divine nurturing that could lead to immortality.

<sup>26</sup>Though see Zeitlin’s salutary warning about the use of this word (1996: 8). I reproduce it here for want of a clear enough alternative. I certainly do not think the *Hymn* “hates” women.

<sup>27</sup>Greek views on the desirability of immortality are unquestionably complex, and there are certainly stories that raise questions about how desirable immortality truly is (e.g., Odysseus’ rejection of Calypso/immortality in favor of Penelope/mortality, and the story of Tithonus). But I take such stories to be attempts to cope with the uncontrollable fact of death, that is, attempts to reconcile humans to their inevitable destiny. See Smith on the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite* (esp. 5–7, 135–37) for a useful discussion of the compensatory function of such myths. See also Nagy 174–210. Rewards such as unquenchable *kleos*, children and generational survival, and the Mysteries remain, in my opinion, compensations for the immortality unattainable by all but the most exceptional mortals (Heracles, Ganymede), and death is in general regarded negatively.

That is, man's origin in his mortal mother's womb ties him firmly to the earth and to mortality.

The *Hymn* does not, it must be said, tie Metaneira explicitly to all mortal women as the *Theogony* does Pandora, nor is it necessary to take Demophoön's experience as representative of the human condition.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Demeter's anger at Metaneira is couched in genderless terms; she speaks of the ignorance and stupidity of ἄνθρωποι, not of women exclusively (*h.Cer.* 256–57). Consequently, it might reasonably be asked whether in pursuing this line of argument I have inappropriately introduced issues of gender into a context that is really more crucially about the gap between mortal and immortal.<sup>29</sup> Though this is certainly an important significance of the Demophoön incident, the name Metaneira suggests that gender is not entirely irrelevant. The precise meaning of the prefix is not entirely clear (Man-changer? Positive: Among men? With men? Negative: Differing from men? Second to men? Coming between men?), but the suffix suggests that she is defined primarily by her relationship to men. We might compare the name Deianeira (destroyer of men) and the Amazon name and epithet Antianeira, both of which are, however, much more clearly hostile.

Both a more feminine orientation of the *Hymn* and Dôsô's peculiar status as a disguised goddess seem to me possible explanations for the discrepancy between the *Hymn*'s positive evaluation of Dôsô and the social ideology described by Bremmer, Falkner, and Garland. But these alternate lines of argument take us in strikingly different directions. The former suggests that the *Hymn* gives us access to women's perspectives that are otherwise hard to come by in the ancient world and that these are much more positive in their evaluation of old women than are male attitudes. The latter suggests that the *Hymn*, by reserving positive feminine attributes for the divine, shares certain misogynistic tendencies with the *Theogony* and consequently offers no more positive vision of mortal old women than do any of our other sources. This seems to leave us with the disappointingly banal conclusion that one can interpret this evidence to suit

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<sup>28</sup>Others have seen Demophoön's function as more specific, representing, for example, the first initiate, but as Foley points out this connection is far from clear. (See Foley 48–49 and works cited there for further discussion; also Nagy 149, 181–82.)

<sup>29</sup>Felson-Rubin and Deal place the emphasis elsewhere in their excellent interpretation of the Demophoön incident. For them, the episode is primarily a lesson for Demeter about the limits of her power. As they nicely put it, "Demeter now realizes the nature of her divinity and the degree of her separation from that which prevents Demophoön and all mortals from attaining immortality or divine knowledge." But I do not see these two interpretations as mutually exclusive; both Demeter and mortals must learn the unsurpassable boundary between mortal and immortal.

one's own theoretical and personal biases, this article being an exercise that reminds us only of how difficult it is to evaluate the status of women in antiquity.<sup>30</sup>

And yet, despite the problems with taking Demeter as a model for mortal old women, I want to suggest that in fact the positive evaluation of old women in the *Hymn* is actually more representative of ancient Greek values, in all their ambivalent complexity, than the general trend of recent scholarship on old women would suggest. Bremmer and Garland show themselves clearly aware of the social function of nurses and their value at points in their respective studies: Garland discusses the high value placed on nurses in his section on children rather than on old age; Bremmer characterizes nurses' activities as "useful" in passing (200). Why do these factors fall out of the equation entirely when the authors come to their general "functionalist" assessments of old women's status? Is this really a product of the way ancient Greek texts portray old women? Or is it a blind spot of the interpreters, caused in part by the very low status that child-care and domestic work have in our own culture, where they are among the lowest paid types of work available? The *Hymn*'s words seem to demand that we should at least consider that these activities gave old women a certain value, not only in the eyes of women but in the eyes of men. Lacking the sexual allure that make younger women so dangerous and removed from the psychologically fraught and sociologically disruptive relationship of mother and son,<sup>31</sup> the aged nurse seems to be one female role that would be relatively unproblematic for Greek men.

Indeed, the epigraphical, literary, and artistic data all tend to support this. Affectionate epitaphs to nurses, both real and literary, testify to a strong and lasting emotional bond between nurse and nurslings, both male and female, and to respect from the nurse's employers.<sup>32</sup> A woman, Hippostrate, speaks repeatedly of both the love (ποθεῖ, ἐφίλου) and honor (τιμῶ, τιμήσω) she has for her nurse (CEG 571.3–5 = IG II<sup>2</sup> 7873). She twice calls her χρηστήν (CEG 571.2, 6). Less emotionally but equally respectfully, a man calls the nurse of his children δικαιοτάτην (CEG 534 (1) 2). Bremmer and Garland (117) dismiss epitaphs as too individual to be representative, but they may have a greater value

<sup>30</sup>For interesting analyses of the problem, see especially Richlin, Versnel.

<sup>31</sup>On the psychological relationship of mother and son, see Slater; on its sociologically disruptive aspects, see Murnaghan.

<sup>32</sup>Call. *Epigr.* 50 Pf., in the voice of a man, emphasizes particularly the old age of the dead nurse. See discussion and references to other material on nurses' gravestones in Clairmont 85–86, 95–97, 130–31. On the related topic of midwives' gravestones, see Demand 130–34. Although midwives were not all old women, certainly greater experience must have increased their knowledge and competence.

than they acknowledge in suggesting what was perceived as normal sentiment that might be publicly acknowledged.<sup>33</sup> Karydas' recent book *Eurycleia and Her Successors* argues that nurses are given considerable authority in Greek literature. Though at points her argument seems to me to be unduly optimistic (see n. 1 and below), it certainly shows that mortal nurses in Greek literature could be dignified by many of the same associations that are granted to the disguised Demeter, as is clearly the case with Eurycleia and Eurynome in the *Odyssey*.<sup>34</sup> It is, therefore, fair to conclude that the negative stereotype of old women as drunken, depraved, superstitious hags is balanced by a positive one of them as warm and loving nurturers, responsible and trusted members of the household. (The example of Phaedra's nurse in the *Hippolytus* does suggest one potential problem with the nurse figure for males. When she has nursed a female member of the household rather than a male, she typically, not surprisingly, feels a much greater allegiance to her nursling than to the men of the household.)

Pfisterer-Haas, in her study of old women in Greek art, has also detailed the importance of the nurse figure for Greek conceptions of old women (16–46). Though she seems to accept the general conclusions of Bremmer and therefore tends to emphasize the negative in her introduction to her material, the portrayals of nurses and other old women she collects vary widely. Portraits of old women that are positive or at least neutral include depictions of Eurycleia, Aithra and other *trophoi* in vase painting and relief sculpture,<sup>35</sup> portraits of old women on grave-reliefs in Athens,<sup>36</sup> and some of the nurse-figures in terracotta.<sup>37</sup> The sympathetic and unusually realistic representation of an old woman (almost certainly Hecuba) on the Polyxena sarcophagus (ca. 520–500 B.C.E.), excavated from the Kizöldün tumulus in 1994 (Sevinç), was discovered after Pfisterer-Haas' publication. The crow's feet, crooked posture, and staff of the mourning woman are features that are not associated with Hecuba in Greek vase painting, but their presence on the sarcophagus suggests that the conception of Hecuba as an old woman was not as foreign as Pfisterer-Haas argues. In this case, Hecuba seems analogous to Priam in embodying nobility and old age simultaneously.

Moreover, some of the depictions that Pfisterer-Haas considers negative may have a more positive significance than she allows. Citing Bakhtin on the

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<sup>33</sup>I am grateful to my colleague Peter Bing for this suggestion.

<sup>34</sup>Concerning the similarities between Demeter in her disguise as Dôsô and Eurycleia, see Karydas 16–18.

<sup>35</sup>See Pfisterer-Haas 19–20, 27–29, and accompanying illustrations.

<sup>36</sup>See especially Athens National Museum 1030, discussed by Clairmont 97–98. Cf. Pfisterer-Haas 30–36.

<sup>37</sup>Pfisterer-Haas 36–46.

laughing, senile pregnant hags of the Kerch terracotta collection (Bakhtin 25–26), O’Higgins argues that the apparently grotesque rotundity of old women found in certain terracottas associated with the worship of Demeter represents not disfiguring obesity but pregnancy.<sup>38</sup> These pregnant hags celebrate a kind of female fecundity that mocks death. O’Higgins further suggests that the oversexed old hags of Attic comedy, who have seemed so offensive to modern commentators, may have a similar significance within the Dionysiac context of drama. This is all the more plausible when we compare them to the oversexed old men of Old Comedy, whose grotesquely exaggerated desire seems a celebration of life in the face of encroaching death.

Growing old in ancient Greece may well have been difficult for many women, particularly for those who were sick, poor, and alone. And yet it was not necessarily as bleak an experience for all women as previous scholarship has tended to suggest. Old women retained a social function with the potential of bringing them much affection and some respect. Though, as in the *Hymn to Demeter*, the *trophos* may often have been a menial position, the common stereotype of the trusted old woman nurturing babies may also reflect a social role that was played by old women of more elevated classes as well, that of grandmother. Moreover, postmenopausal women were probably not suddenly liberated from the house out of lack of interest in their safety and protection. They probably continued to socialize primarily with close neighbors and to attend the same kind of social and religious events as when they were younger. The image of Demeter wandering the earth in the guise of an old woman is almost certainly not verisimilar and should lose its hold on the imagination of scholars seeking to understand the experience of old women in ancient Greece. Finally, though Bremmer and other scholars have done a good job in documenting negative stereotypes associated with old women, these negative images need to be balanced against more positive ones, such as that of Dôsô in the *Hymn*. Though a disguised goddess, she is no less a product of the Greek imagination than the aging courtesans, Harpies, Graiai, witches and the rest that serve Bremmer’s strong claim (203–6) that old women have a purely negative valence in the Greek *imaginaire*.

The work of gerontologists on the aging in twentieth-century society clearly indicates that the experience of old age varies widely depending on a number of factors, including economic resources, health, individual psychology, social

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<sup>38</sup>Pfisterer-Haas interprets these as aging, fat *hetairai* with an exclusively negative valence. But O’Higgins’ account gives a more compelling explanation of such figures’ role in the cults of Demeter.

resources, and maintenance of a stable intimate relationship (see, e.g., Streib, Lowenthal and Haven, and Miller, esp. 288–90). In Greece too an old woman who was wealthy, or surrounded by loving family members, or one who enjoyed tending young children, would have quite a different experience from one who was sick, poor, and alone. As classicists, we will no doubt be closer to the truth if we can stop thinking of “old women in ancient Greece” as a distinct and homogeneous social class to which a single value can be assigned or as a monolithic category provoking a uniform emotional reaction. No doubt the paucity of evidence and the difficulties in interpreting it have contributed to such overgeneralization. But we must be sure that we have weighed every scrap of evidence, even if ambiguous, as carefully as we can.

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