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Motherhood(s) and Polytheisms: Epistemological and Methodological Reflections on the Study of Religions, Gender, and Women

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Abstract

Through an approach that combines the academic study of religions with motherhood studies, this article examines rarely considered maternal aspects of Demeter, a goddess of the pantheon of ancient Greek religion. We first discuss theoretical input and concepts drawn from maternal theory that are relevant to uncover innovative lines of research on religious representations and practices in polytheistic systems of the past. In this way we also contribute to broader epistemological reflections in the history and study of religions. Then, considering the *Homeric Hymn* as well as key ritual elements of the *Thesmophoria* festival through the lenses of maternal theory, we examine the mother-daughter relationship and the role of the mother as maternal trainer. This concrete case study from the ancient Greek world demonstrates the relevance for histori- ans of religions of considering past polytheistic systems while harnessing the fruitful interdisciplinary potential of maternal theory.

* The authors worked collaboratively on all sections of the article. Florence Pasche Guignard prepared the first three sections and Giulia Pedrucci prepared more specifically the fourth, fifth, and sixth sections (on the Demeter case). The authors wrote the concluding remarks together.

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Keywords

Demeter and Kore – Greek polytheism – gender – motherhood – maternal theory

To Bring Forth, Give Birth, and (Re)Produce: Motherhood as A Relevant Topic for the Academic Study of Religions

Some contend that motherhood is the "unfinished business of feminism" (O'Reilly 2016: 2), in the sense that women as mothers, their roles, status, and work, are rarely at the center of feminist inquiries. Many discussions in both activist and academic feminism have focused on women's bodily difference and autonomy, as well as on sexual and reproductive health, with a focus on contraception. Nevertheless, in spite of decades of rich scholarship on gender and women, motherhood remains a marginal topic both in gender studies and in our discipline, the study of religions. In fact, a "pervasive feminist discomfort with all things maternal" remains (O'Reilly 2014), as many — though not all — strands within feminism have sought to avoid motherhood, often both in practice and in theory.

In this article, we explain how, as historians and scholars of religions, we could challenge this and uncover new lines of research in our own discipline through the fruitful interdisciplinary input of "motherhood studies," a field that emerged from women's and gender studies in the last twenty years. We demonstrate this through the case study of the goddess Demeter, a major figure in the polytheistic pantheon of ancient Greece.[1] The choice of such an example stands in sharp contrast to most current scholarship on the intersection

1 In our recent edited volume, *Motherhood(s) and Polytheisms* (Pasche Guignard, Pedrucci, and Scapini 2017; see also note 10 below), we opted for an encompassing and very inclusive "negative definition" of polytheism: for heuristic purposes, we considered as polythe- istic all religions that do *not* fall within the three monotheisms traditionally recognized as such (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) in addition to others that scholars generally label as monotheistic (such as Zoroastrianism and Sikhism). These religions are often today charac- terized by the idea of an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, and transcendent god. We intentionally wrote "a god" instead of "a unique god" in order to better include different forms of Christianity in our definition. Therefore, any religious system that admits and tolerates a divine being — to be understood as the existence of a superhuman or transhuman reality — declined in the plural form is a polytheism. In this way, we could include in our comparative study all those religious systems populated by figures such as ancestors, spirits, heroes, or other superhuman beings who die. Such a broad definition has a potential for overcoming the legacy of the evolutionist perspectives that characterized *Religionswissenschaft* at the time of its emergence, as well as scales of values implying notions of "better" and "worse,"

[page 407] of motherhood and religions. On the one hand, most scholars interested in such issues work on recent or contemporary Euro-American, often secular- ized, contexts. We present this article as one possible response to Kathryn Lofton's recent call to engage with "political descriptions of the history of religion" (Lofton 2016: 808) and to consider parenting discourses and practices as a relevant topic of critical inquiry for the study of religions. Lofton writes:

> I want to attend to the specific strategies by which societies "bring forth, give birth to, produce" themselves.... This description — bring forth, give birth to, produce — summarizes the noun use of the present participle of *parere*. This terming gives rise to our present application of the word parent. It is my wager that parenting may provide us a way to thread the needle between epistemology, sociology, and history, between how we live and how we conceive of the histories of our living. Accounts of parenting as an historical object invariably point out its recent popularity as a terming of a specific interpersonal relation.
>
> Lofton 2016: 808

On the other hand, specialists of religions in ancient Greece are rarely open to interdisciplinary and comparative approaches that integrate matricentric feminist epistemological frameworks, beyond the use of gender as a critical category of analysis. We believe that our discipline should be at least

epistemologically comparative.[2] Thus, we aim at reflecting on issues that have a contemporary relevance while including research on polytheistic systems, including historical ones that we access only through literary, iconographic, and archaeologic sources. We contend that examining representations of Demeter offers an original and relevant point of contrast to rethink some of the links between maternity and religion. An analysis with a comparative and historical depth of examples from past contexts provides scholars of religions with a critical distance from contemporary and highly mediated debates about family, kinship, and filiation, the tone and focus of which tend to be moral, or even theological.[3]

"superior" and "inferior." See, Zwi Werblowsky 1987; Schmidt 1988; Gladigow 2001, 2007; Guittard 2010; Pedrucci 2017a.

2 This does not imply that every single publication in the study of religions should be comparative, but that the categories we consider can be constructed only through comparison and, thus, through confrontation with works in specialized fields different from our own.

3 Normative discourses about motherhood, fatherhood, and family that are influenced by re- ligious conservatism tend to reemerge in confrontation with new technologies and social change. Examples of such debates include positions of movements such as "La Manif pour

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We address issues that have a wider historical and comparative significance for our discipline through looking more specifically at the relationship of Demeter with her daughter Kore/Persephone. We choose to focus on representations of the goddess foremost as a nurturer rather than solely as a birth-giver, and to emphasize her role as maternal trainer to her daughter. Thus, we intentionally explore a case study that differs in many aspects from others in previous scholarship in the study of religions. Though we focus on a "mother goddess" — which is a classical topic in our discipline — we look at a mother-daughter relationship and not at yet another case of a feminine figure giving birth to or nurturing a male god central to his own myth. Additionally, we move away from discussing the Eleusinian myth only in terms of marriage, the cycle of nature, and the promotion of fertility, as scholars usually do in their analysis of this myth.

What makes the Demeter-Kore/Persephone couple a compelling and probably unique case is also the fact that it consists of two "full" deities, two female peers. These two goddesses differ from other typical "mother-son" couples (such as Semele-Dionysus, Alcmena-Heracles, where the mother dies and the child needs some kind of "divine assistance" for his apotheosis; see Pedrucci 2017b), as well as from the Leto-Artemis couple (where the daughter helps the mother give birth to her twin brother Apollo, right after her own birth; see Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1.21).[4] If we consider this particular couple from a genealogical point of view, ideally, Kore/Persephone is supposed to become like her mother after puberty in order to perform her role. As an obvious consequence, she must be trained for this. In the case study explored in this article, we focus precisely on this role of Demeter as maternal trainer.

Gender emerged as a critical category of analysis under the influence of 20th-century thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, and theories about gender have extended their influence in many fields of the humanities and social sciences, including the study of religions. We argue that after implementing the "gender critical turn" (Warne 2000: 249–260; see also, King 2004; Juschka 2005), successfully taken as early as in the 1980s, our discipline would benefit from integrating a "mother turn," in line with Kathryn Lofton's recent

Tous" that oppose, among other issues, same-sex marriage in France, but also other issues such as gestational surrogacy or adoption by same-sex couples.

4 We might also think of Hera and Eileithyia. The latter, even though she is a daughter, also plays a role in specific maternal functions. However, the relationship between Hera and Eileithyia seems to be much "colder;" sometimes Eileithyia acts as a

sort of duplicate of her mother for a specific, highly specialized function. For the mother-daughter couple in Greek myths, see below.

[page 409] call to consider the history of parenting and, by extension, the representations of maternal figures and practices, as relevant and revealing topics for the study of religions.

Maternal Theory and Epistemology

"Mothers" stand at the intersection of two other categories: that of "woman" and that of "parent." In this article, we consider maternity as a cultural practice rather than as a biological function. Our conception of maternity is thus much broader than specific events such as pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation. Rather, it encompasses *both* mothering *and* motherhood, two terms that we distinguish following Adrienne Rich, who writes that there are

> two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential — and all women — shall remain under male control.
>
> Rich 1995: 13 (italics in the original)

In spite of a wealth of scholarship on religion and gender, there remain many unexplored lines of research on mother*ing* as women's experience, whereas mother*hood* as an institution is more studied. This distinction, which is possible at least conceptually, remains one of the key tenets of maternal theory.

Two other key theoretical elements of maternal theory are part of our interdisciplinary approach: these are the rejection of essentialism and the disassociation of the category "mother" from that of "woman." In contrast with Lofton's definition and insistence on "the noun use of the present participle of *parere*" (2016: 808) and her preference for the term "parent," we argue that the word "mother" should be retained. We suggest that the word "mother" can be used without falling into the trap of essentializing certain kinds of nurturing and care-giving activities relating to children.

Several reasons lead us to choose "mother" over "parent" in this article. First, etymologically, "parent" derives from *parĕre*,[5] as Lofton correctly points out. Although etymologists suggest other ancient meanings for this verb, "enfanter, mettre au monde ... est le sens usuel et classique" (Ernoult and Meillet 2001:

5 *Parĕre* is an irregular verb from the third conjugation.

[page 410] 483, s.v. pario) this is by far the most widespread.[6] One of our aims is precisely to avoid further reducing "the maternal" to the biological act of giving birth. Beyond childbirth itself, if the term "parent," in English, may *seem* more "inclusive," it certainly is not constructed as genderless. Even though care work and nurture are not *essentially* gendered activities, such work was, and in many contexts still is, predominantly attributed to and performed by women, many of whom are mothers. They are considered (and often named) primarily in their maternal role rather than as generic "parents." Lofton herself, in her study of the rise of American parenting with a focus on the 20th century, suggests that

> the term [parent] is more a rhetorical compromise rather than a reflection of some practiced reality because the historical record demonstrates that women continued to do

> the lion's share of work surrounding offspring: nursing, maintenance, cultivation, tutoring, counseling, feeding, cleaning, and even disciplining. Women did this work....
>
> Lofton 2016: 809

Ancient sources reflect such "practiced reality" as well. Acknowledging this is not to ground such highly gendered work in biology, nor to accept it as unchangeable. In the contexts reflected in our ancient sources, such as the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* or the works of philosophers such as Plato or Plutarch, parental roles of "mother" and "father" were not as interchangeable as they might have become. Indeed, in many contemporary contexts, fathers are getting more involved in the practical care and nurture of their own children (and, more rarely, in that of children they do not consider as their own).

Another reason for using "mother" and not "parent" in this article is contextual: we focus on Demeter's role as "maternal trainer" in her relationship to her daughter. The gendered component of this role matters. Demeter was seen as a mother to her daughter Kore/Persephone, not just a generic and genderless parent. The myth stages Kore's despairing mother, and not her father, Zeus, nor another genderless parental figure, looking for her. Moreover, Kore/Persephone is trained into becoming a mother, not a father or a parent.

Moreover, the concrete tasks we call "maternal" are gendered in most cases, yet, at least in ancient Greece, the girls or women in charge of such tasks were not necessarily the "parent" in the contemporary sense: as we discuss in our

6 Ernoult and Meillet write further: "le sens général de *parēns*, qui s'applique au père comme à la mère, montre que le sens initial de *pariō* n'est pas l'enfantement par la mère" (2001: 484). *Pariō* indeed is sometimes used in reference to male genitors who "father" a child or produce an offspring. Yet, in most cases, *pariō* is used in reference to women who give birth.

[page 411] case study, in the social reality, caregivers could be older sisters, servants, wetnurses, or other relatives. In mythological accounts, even divinities or animals undertake maternal tasks.

Lofton inspires us, however, to emphasize *actions* over *status* (what people or divinities do rather than what they are or are supposed to be). Indeed, our second reason for using "mother" is that we read "mother" first as a verb (to mother) rather than only as a feminine, substantive noun. Mother can thus also be gender inclusive, as Sara Ruddick, another influential scholar in motherhood studies, outlines. She defines a mother as

> a person who takes on responsibility for children's lives and for whom providing child care is a significant part of her or his working life. I *mean* "her or his." Although most mothers have been and are women, mothering is potentially work for men and women.
>
> Ruddick 1990: 40 (italics in the original)

According to Ruddick, a mother, thus, is anyone who engages in maternal practice, or mother-work, and makes this a significant part of their life. From a perspective of the study of religions, this leads to thought-provoking questions, such as: "Do monks mother?" in the case, for instance, of monastic institutions (in Buddhism for example) to which lay parents commit their children, or when these institutions, in practice, are orphanages run by monks.[7] This also prompts us to reexamine mythological representations of the mother-work of goddesses and of gods, as we do in the following section with Demeter.

Another key contribution to maternal theory by Sara Ruddick is her articulation of the three demands of maternal thinking — preservation, growth, and social acceptance — that are met by the three practices of preservative love, nurturance, and training (Ruddick 1990: 17). While these demands are postulated as universals or "ubiquitous" (O'Reilly and Ruddick 2009: 17), the ways in which mothers meet

them vary across cultures and religions. The role of mother as trainer is particularly relevant for our case study on Demeter, though we extend Ruddick's notion to include and stress more specifically the training of a girl into maternal work, which will later ensure her social acceptance.

In building an interpretative framework useful to us as scholars of religions, we also used more recent work in motherhood studies. Prevailing forms of feminism "point to the problem of birth and motherhood as negatively related

7 Some of these monks have been described as "affectionate like mothers" towards the children they concretely care for. See, for example, Samuels 2010: 31–21, 65, for considerations in the context of Sri Lanka.

[page 412] to biological essentialism" (Hennessey 2015: 194). However, the epistemological framework offered by matricentric feminism clearly rejects essentialism and does not conflate the category of "woman" with that of "mother."[8] Indeed, not all women will become birth-givers or nurturers, another key distinction in the definition of "mother" through the actions of bringing forth, giving birth to, or producing on the one hand, and preserving life, nurturing the child, and training him or her into social acceptability on the other hand.[9] People who are not women can take on maternal roles. In some of the mythological narratives that we studied, even gods give birth (like Zeus partially gestating and bringing forth Athena and Dionysus) and even animals mother (like the goat Amalthea that suckles Zeus as a baby, while bees feed the young god honey; see Pedrucci 2013: 134–137).

Finally, we also acknowledge that what we contemporary scholars trained in the "Western" academic tradition label as "religion" rarely can be carved out as a neatly separated domain. In the introduction to our previous volume, *Motherhood(s) and Polytheisms*, we discuss in more detail which data, sources, and analytical tools are available and necessary for the study of the complex relationship between religious discourses *on* mothers and, when applicable, mothers' discourses on the religious traditions that provide a framework for their everyday mother work (Pasche Guignard, Pedrucci, and Scapini 2017).[10] As historians and scholars of religions, we deal with categories that emerged in the Euro-American androcentric academia of the late 19th century, such as that of "religion" itself, or "priest," "sacrifice," and many others. The concept of "polytheism" is contentious as well (see above, note 1), but that of "mother" might also be. Such categories often prove inadequate, especially for the study of religious expressions outside of Europe, Christianity, and monotheisms in

8 It is important to note here that the matricentric feminism articulated by Andrea O'Reilly (2016) and other feminist motherhood scholars is distinct from the political doctrine of maternalism, which recognizes inborn qualities in women based on their alleged mater- nal instincts. Maternalists argue that women are entitled to contribute to society outside of the domestic sphere (which they are assigned or even restricted to in many societies), precisely because of these qualities, and especially as moral and progressive reformers, including in religious organizations, or in professions of care work.

9 See Pasche Guignard 2016 and 2017b for examples of such distinctions in the context of studying maternal figures of Hindu mythology.

10 Our approach and our research questions in this article build upon key elements that we and other contributors evidenced in *Motherhood(s) and Polytheisms* (Pasche Guignard, Pedrucci, and Scapini 2017). We further investigate the Demeter case through the lenses of maternal theory and present it here as an article, independently from the book.

[page 413] general. For lack of a better terminology, we still use such categories, but with an awareness of their loaded heritage.

In contrast to early contributors to our discipline, we study the experience of maternity by men and "women for whom gender dualism is often remarkably untroubled" (Klassen 2004: 591) through the theoretical resources of gender studies that question and trouble such dualism. Key maternal theorists wrote in the second half of the 20th century (see below). Applying maternal theory to case studies in cultural and religious contexts different from those in which maternal theory first emerged thus should

not be more shocking than using categories developed in the study of religions. In fact, we ask what a difference it would make if we put as much effort into criticizing and deconstructing the category "mother" as we do with the categories "polytheism" or "religion."

Trends in the Study of Religions, Gender, Women, and Mothers

Recurring trends in scholarship on mothers, maternal figures, and maternity emerge from scholarship in disciplines contributing to the academic study of religions.[11] Generally, women as mothers mostly have remained at the margins, both as objects and as subjects, in the study of religions and, more surprisingly, also in the broader field of gender studies, especially since the 2000s (as demonstrated by O'Reilly 2016: 192–199).

The "founding fathers" and early contributors to our discipline generally considered motherhood as natural or instinctive, in line with conceptions about women and gender roles in parenting prevailing at the time of the emergence and development of the study of religions as an academic discipline (late 19th and early 20th century). If motherhood is grounded in biology and universal, why, then, bother to study it? In addition to the dominant androcentrism and textocentrism of the early academic study of religions, scholars had other objective reasons to overlook mothers as a topic of study. Indeed, accessing rel- evant sources presents an important epistemological challenge, especially for historians of religions of the past: in many cases, accessing sources specifically on women's religious experiences or featuring direct feminine voices is diffi- cult, either because they have never been produced, not been transmitted, or perhaps because they were censored. This is the case for antiquity and also for other earlier and later periods, until the emergence of women as published authors. Engaging in a careful "mirror reading" of scarce or fragmentary sources

11 For an extensive, though not exhaustive, literature review on this topic, with precise ex- amples of published works, see Pasche Guignard 2017a.

[page 414] may nevertheless uncover new aspects of the interplay between maternity and religion.

Furthermore, it is often difficult to assess the extent to which women's religious worldviews and experiences were different from those of men. Women writers, or rather "composers," in contexts where oral literature prevailed, were frequently close to — or even a part of — the religious, literate elite that scholars often turn to when studying religions. Literate women, and especially the "religious ones" (such as priestesses, poetesses, or famous women saints) were not necessarily mothers. If they were mothers, then their writings did not necessarily reflect the practical or ritual maternal concerns that we are interested in as scholars. It would be quite an essentialist assumption to think that they should. Women as mothers have other identities, roles, and concerns than maternal ones. And when women's writings reflect maternal concerns, these are not necessarily linked to or framed within religious discourses and practices.

As a result of these epistemological challenges, the women or feminine figures who deserved scholarly attention were often the "extraordinary" ones, those who managed to escape wifehood and motherhood, including in religious ways (e.g., women as nuns or saints). A few famous mothers of great founders of religions, saints, kings, or poets were considered for their decisive role in shaping the identity of the future man. Inversely, scholars also pointed out any absence of maternal figures as significant. Some specific maternal topics, however, stand out: mother goddesses, maternal elements in mythology, and divine maternities. These topics chiefly concern *representations* of motherhood and mothers as constructed by religious discourses and culture more broadly.

New directions for research in these areas are slowly emerging, such as those that reappraise, from a non-theological standpoint, maternal imagery and discourses in religious traditions. As far as actual mothers and their historically attested religious practices are concerned, fertility rituals (often those of brides and wives as *future* mothers) and prescriptions regarding (im)purity are common topics. The rituals conducted before, during, and after pregnancy and childbirth are also key topics, especially for anthropologists. However, it is difficult to find studies that really focus on mothers and their perspectives, and not just on women as wives or as daughters, two identities that are more prevalent in male-dominated religions and reflect the assumptions of patriarchal cultures (Sered 1994: 71). More recent scholarship also uncovers how various religious traditions, especially monotheistic ones, intersect with women's reproductive decisions: religious discourses often claim to dictate to people, and especially to women (in a double standard that needs no further comment here), with whom, when, and how many children they should have. The embodied experiences of pregnancy and childbirth are the ones most frequently [page 415] written about, but studies on the concrete and practical mothering of babies and of older children in religious contexts are difficult to find in the field of the study of religions.

What about the other discipline from which we borrow some key tenets for our analysis of the maternal roles of Demeter? Motherhood studies and the body of scholarship known as "maternal theory" emerged in mostly North American academic contexts in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (O'Reilly 2007). Writing primarily about contemporary Euro-American societies, several scholars contributing to motherhood studies use the lexical field of religion to describe — at least metaphorically — and analyze the main object of their studies. In *Of Woman Born* (first published in 1976), Adrienne Rich devotes many pages to considering how religion contributes to the enforcement of patriarchy, although neither "religion" nor "spirituality" appear in the index (in contrast with "Christianity," "Hindu," and other terms such as "myth" and "magic"). One of her chapters is entitled "the 'sacred calling'" (1995: 41– 55). Shari Thurer (1994) debunks what she labels "the myths of motherhood." Sharon Hays speaks of "the sacred child" in her critique of the "ideology of intensive mothering" (1996: 97).[12] Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels deconstruct "the mommy myth" and the "new momism" (2004). About a decade later, Judith Warner, writing about the ways in which "motherhood in America has unmoored from reality and turned into theology," (2005: 134) asserts that motherhood in itself can be a religion (132–158), a proposition even more radi- cal than Lofton's recent call simply to start telling "the story to be told about parents in the history of religions" (2016: 828). A few authors, though, go beyond this convenient and metaphorical use of "motherhood as religion" or as "theology" and offer valuable considerations on the links between religions, parenting cultures, and practices, as well as gender relations in parenting.

A recent review of literature in this field (Pasche Guignard 2017a) highlighted that, in contrast to other trends within feminist scholarship, scholars of motherhood do not simply dismiss "religion" as oppressive to women without further investigation. Overall, it seems that both motherhood and religions re- main contentious (though not unexplored) topics for many researchers situ- ated in feminist studies departments: since both are still prone to be quickly

12 Hays describes the ideology of intensive mothering that affects mostly middle class white mothers (in the USA where she conducted her research in the 1990s). According to such ideology, which has gained momentum and has now spread to other cultural and geographical areas as well, "the methods of appropriate child-rearing are constructed as child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays 1996: 8).

[page 416] labeled as oppressive to women's minds and bodies, both are to be avoided as objects of in-depth critical inquiry (not to mention as personal practices).[13] Likewise, conducting research on both motherhood and religion certainly is not a strategic move in terms of academic advancement.

Although studies that address a primary readership in women's and gender studies build up and add to a rich scholarship on gender and women's religious practices, from the perspective of the academic study of religions we can nevertheless be critical of some aspects of scholarship on religion in motherhood

studies (Pasche Guignard 2017a: 75–80). We should keep in mind, though, the different disciplinary background, purpose, and primary readership of their authors.

First, our broader survey shows that in works by motherhood studies scholars on "religion," the focus is often limited (or worse, reduced) to traditional forms of Christianity, Judaism, and more recently, Islam,[14] in spite of recent efforts to include more contexts, including polytheistic ones (see, for example, Reimer 2016). Then, many such studies take for granted emic definitions of religion and religious experiences. They rarely question the categories and terminology used to describe maternal experiences of religions. These works tend to feature research based on fieldwork in contemporary contexts in which researchers have a direct access to rich sources, which is coherent with their purpose and the idea of engaged scholarship that many departments of women's, gender, and feminist studies accept — and sometimes demand — from their researchers. Their methodological perspectives are anthropological or sociological in most cases. Literary analysis is common as well, again consistently with the insistence of matricentric feminist scholarship to bring authentic mothers' voices from the margins to the center. In contrast, these collections rarely feature works with historical perspectives on contexts for which sources authored by women are more difficult to find. Works that consider maternal figures and mother goddesses from contemporary feminist perspectives often do so without engaging with the critique against romantic or ideological perspectives on, and reconstructions of, a matriarchal prehistory or even history (for examples of such critiques, see, Eller 1993, 2000; Georgoudi 1991).

13 For further comments on such marginalization in feminist research, see Reimer 2016: 11.

14 The specialized scholarly press most active in motherhood studies (Demeter Press) has released one volume on mothering, religion, and spirituality (Reimer 2016), another one specifically on Muslim mothering (Pappano and Olwan 2016), one entitled *Mothering Mennonite* (Fast and Epp Buller 2013), as well as one on South Asian mothering (Sangha and Gonsalves 2013), which includes perspectives on Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh mothers, among others.

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Both in the study of religions and in motherhood studies, one particular issue remains underinvestigated: the role of mothers as primary religious enculturators for their children, in any tradition, but especially in polytheistic ones.[15] One of the aims of this article is thus to shed some light on this issue through the example of Demeter and the mother-daughter relationship in a polytheistic system. Before any formal religious education takes place, most children get their very first exposure to religious narratives and daily domestic rituals from their mothers or other caregivers in charge of parenting tasks (see note 36 for more on figures who mother in addition to the mother of the child). Even the ancient Greek philosopher Plato acknowledges that mothers and other caregivers are the ones who *first* tell infants and children stories about divinities and other worldviews (see, for example, Plato, *Republic* 350e and 377c; also see Ernoult 2015: 2, quoted below, p. 422). Plato opposes the contents of the "old wives' tales" that mothers and servants recount to young children (also see *Gorgias* 527a) and proposes a list of sanctioned narratives to shape children's minds: "And the stories on the accepted list we will induce nurses and mothers to tell to the children and so shape their souls by these stories far rather than their bodies by their hands" (*Republic* 377c).[16] Though Plato condemns the contents of the tales, he recognizes mothers and nurses in their roles in shaping the children's souls (in addition to the bodywork they perform "with their hands"). He does not suggest replacing mothers and nurses in their position as storytellers, as transmitters of mythological narratives. Rather, his solution consists of vetting the type and contents of the "tales." We address below more specifically this role of mother as trainer in our case study on Demeter.

15 We borrow this expression from Vanessa Reimer's observations about fundamentalist Christian women in Canada. Reimer observes that, in their own contexts, these "women are regarded as the God-ordained primary caregivers and enculturators of their children" (2014: 282).

16 Cf. Plato, *Republic* 377b, 378d, 381e, as well as *Laws* 789e, 793e, 794a. According to Plato, women's influence on children is crucial until the age of six. Mothers and other women should carefully choose which stories and myths they tell children. The nurse, in particular, should bring the baby to the temple. In Plutarch's opinion (*The Education of Children* 3e–f, where he refers to Plato, *Laws* 887d), the baby is a creature whose mind *and* body both need to be shaped (starting in the uterus by the movements of the mother, then by swaddling it). Tertullian (*Against the Valentinians* 3) and Prudentius (*Against Symmachus* 1.201–211) also mention storytelling by nurses. Prudentius is very critical of it because he believes that nurses might teach children about "pagan" divinities. Also see Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.1.2; Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 1.1.5. See Pedrucci 2018.

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Demeter: A Case Study through the Lenses of Maternal Theory

In the following section, we offer an empirical case study to demonstrate the fruitfulness of bringing together motherhood studies and the study of religions. We reflect on how polytheistic societies construct their divinities in relation to specific social roles (motherhood, in our case) and the everyday life of these specific social types (mothering). Through doing so, we acknowledge that in ancient Greece, as well as in other polytheistic contexts, such "building" of a pantheon is deeply rooted in social reality. Indeed, generally speaking, and especially in the ancient Mediterranean, a pantheon is organized according to familial, or at least genealogical, patterns. In them, divine characters tend to display aspects and feelings that are very similar to human ones (gods and goddesses get mad, they are jealous or unfaithful, just like humans). However, this divine society is not the faithful projection of the human one at a superhuman level: many *décalages* exist between the two, and these have to be investigated attentively. In Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge's words:

> il s'agit toujours d'un miroir déformant et non d'une photographie. Toute la difficulté sera de repérer à quel point la référence à une expérience humaine s'infléchit pour laisser la place à une réflexion sur la spécificité de la sphère supra-humaine.
>
> Pirenne-Delforge 2010: 686

The myriad of variations on the same myth and on the same deity, moreover, teach us that we cannot consider polytheistic narratives and characters as monolithic and unilateral, if we really aim at understanding the society that created them and the society's religious system (see Pironti 2013; Pedrucci 2017b). A deity can display one characteristic and its opposite. A goddess can be both benevolent and malevolent; she can be a loving and an evil mother at the same time. It is necessary to delve deeper into the specific contexts of a particular divinity or group of divinities in order to understand (often only) apparent inconsistencies.

Demeter and Kore/Persephone: The Mother-Daughter Relationship

Demeter is one of the best-known "mother goddesses," a mother par excellence of the Greek pantheon. Indeed, De-*mētēr* has the word "mother" (μήτηρ) in her theonym.[17] As such, this figure provides us with a significant case study to illus-

17 There is a debate on this issue, but, as Pirenne-Delforge has pointed out, "quelle que soit l'étymologie de son nom, pour une oreille grecque, il contient le terme *métér*" (2008: 39).

[page 419] trate several of our claims about the relevance of maternal theory for the study of religions. Demeter plays the roles of both mother and nurse. As we have already pointed out, the respective roles of mother and nurse are not human types transferred as such to divine society. Pirenne-Delforge has already suggested (2010: 685) that human experiences are translated at a higher level to suggest some aspects of the relationship that humans want to establish with their gods.

Though the goddess is known through many sources, we focus our analysis on the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (7th–6th century bce),[18] which portrays the goddess as the loving and sorrowful mother of Kore/Persephone. According to Bruit Zaidman (2012a, 2012b), the younger goddess has two names because, as Kore, she embodies the daughter of Demeter and, as Persephone, the wife of Hades. As her theonym, *Kore*, itself indicates, she is a young maiden, a bride-to- be. In fact, Hades abducts her to his underworld kingdom because he wants to marry her. Distressed with loss and grief, Demeter then sets out on a ceaseless search for her daughter Persephone. This takes her to the palace of Celeus, king of Eleusis, in Attica. There, assuming the form of an old woman, she asks the king for shelter and he takes her in as a nurse for his son. To reward his kindness, Demeter wants to make one of the king's children immortal by passing the baby through a fire. But Metaneira, the mother of the child, stops Demeter, and her plan fails. At the very end of the story, Kore comes back to her mother, but she will also stay in the underworld with her new husband for several months every year.

Demeter and Kore are traditionally regarded as an extremely cohesive couple. Greek literary sources reflect this, even through the grammatical use not just of the "plural" form but of the unusual "dual" form to describe them. As Lévêque (1986) has demonstrated, the "mother and daughter couple" is a *mythème* widespread from the Neolithic period in the Mediterranean basin.[19] Even though the mother-daughter couple is quite frequent in Greek mythology as well, the Demeter and Kore/Persephone couple stands out in a particular

18 The mythological narratives know many variations. For instance, according to Pausanias (8.25.2), in a narrative circulated in Arcadia, not only does Kore not come back to her mother for a period during the year, but Demeter is raped by Poseidon and gives birth to a girl (whose name is not revealed) and to a horse. See Bruit Zaidman 2012a.

19 There are many studies on the (very close) relationship between mothers and daughters in the Classical World; see, for example, Foley 2003; Bodiou 2006 (Bodiou places a particularly interesting emphasis on the similarities between Demeter and Kore in artistic representations); Pedrucci 2013: 50 (see also bibliography there).

[page 420] way, as we pointed out in the introduction to this article and as we discuss further below.[20]

The story of the relationship between Demeter and Kore/Persephone, besides being the narrative that notoriously established the Eleusinian mysteries,[21] also recalls the festival called *Thesmophoria*.[22] Likely because men were excluded from it (Bremmer 2012: 28), we do not know much about this festival, though it is safe to say that it dated back to the second millennium bce and that it was widespread geographically, extending even to Greek colonies. There were many local variations of this festival. In Athens, it lasted three days and was "the most striking interruption of the year in the routine of women's life ... Three days away from the wool basket!" (Parker 2005: 271). In Sicily, it even lasted ten days (see, for example, Bremmer 2012; Sfameni Gasparro 2008). The *Thesmophoria* festival was also a unique opportunity for mothers and married daughters (without little children, according to Parker [2005: 271], whom their mothers likely left at home in the care of others, such as servants) to rejoin each other and share some yearly intimate time together (Bruit Zaidman 2012a: 390; Parker 2005: 278–279). In Athens the festival was structured in this way: on the first day ἄνοδος (going up), on the second day νηστεία (fasting), and on the third day καλλιγένεια (literally, beautiful, fair birth), followed by the banquet. The intention of this festival was to promote not only the fertility of the land, but also human procreation.

As Robert Parker (2005: 275–276) has pointed out, any interpretation of the *Thesmophoria* must confront at least the following propositions: first, the *Thesmophoria* related to the fertility of the fields;

second, the *Thesmophoria* related to the fertility of women; and third, the *Thesmophoria* served to define the status of citizen women (or, to be more precise, the status of women

20 The particular features of the Demeter–Kore/Persephone couple are discussed in the in- troduction. Examples of other mother-daughter couples are Hera and Eileithyia, Leto and Artemis, Gaia and Themis. See Fernández García 2009 and above.

21 Calame (1997) reflects on the complex interrelation between "myth" and "rite," with a special focus on the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. He particularly insists on the fact that we cannot speak of an "initiation myth." Indeed, the status of Kore is ambivalent and "suspended": she is at the same time wife (when she stays with Hades) and maiden (when she stays with Demeter). Moreover, the cycle of the seasons that is described in the hymn is not realistic. Calame (1997: 126) concludes: "Si l'*Hymne à Déméter* a bien une fonction étiologique, c'est moins par une relation de correspondance terme à terme entre "mythe" et "rite" que dans l'institution des grandes représentations constitutives, par le processus symbolique, d'une idéologie" (1997: 126). See also Ernoult 2015: 5.

22 The bibliography on the *Thesmophoria* is considerable. For our purpose, we will simply refer readers to Parker (2005: 270–283) with its bibliography and innovative perspectives.

[page 421] as opposed to men, and of citizen women as opposed to all other women), that is, being a mother to legitimate citizens.[23] This, in turn, takes us back to the second point, and indirectly to the first: the goddess "Fair Birth" gave her name to the third day of the festival, the conclusive one. The relation between women and Demeter was grounded in the fertility of women, which allowed them to symbolize (and to seek to ensure ritually) the fertility of the fields. Indeed, any woman who brought to Demeter the goddess's preferred offering, a piglet, could not forget that various words for "pig" (such as χοῖρος) were the most common slang for the female genitalia (Parker 2005: 276). On this basis, we can assert that the main issue, the ultimate goal of the main public festival concerning Demeter and Kore/Persephone, was further baby citizens. In other words, referring to Lofton's already quoted terms (see above, p. 407), at the center of this festival were not only women or mothers, but the ways in which society "brings forth, gives birth to, and produces."

Demeter as Maternal Trainer

Let us go back to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* to further our point. It was already evident to Carl Jung and Károly Kerényi (1969: 139–256), that the two goddesses should be seen as a dual entity, representing two distinct but complementary phases of a woman's life, maidenhood and motherhood. However, an understanding of the κόρη and the mother as a binary is probably too sharp. The reunion of Kore/Persephone and Demeter is a reminder of the continuity that springs from the merging of these stages: the maiden becomes the mother, and the mother gives birth to the maiden. Sue Blundell also envisions this as a continuum rather than as a binary: "It might be said that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter" (1995: 42). The comparison with the following passage by Kerenyi can be of interest: "She must always be maiden and always be mother. Before every love she is a maiden, after every love she is a mother" (Jung and Kerenyi 1969: 142).[24] Several archaeological sources reflect the close relationship between the two goddesses. One of the most striking images is that of Kore sitting on her mother's knees, as if she were a little girl, in a red-figure lekythos.[25] An Hellenistic terracotta from Myrina features two feminine figures in a similarly intimate position, but

23 Pedrucci 2013: 23–31 discusses this point and provides bibliographical reference on previous discussions of the issue of the status of women as mothers of (future) male citizens.

24 Kerényi is quoting the words of an Abyssinian woman.

25 Archeological Museum of Sofia, 7721, Demeter and Kore, 4th century bce: see Bodiou 2012: 325.

[page 422] seated side by side, looking closely at each other. The one wearing a veil, probably the elder, is holding her left hand upon her right breast.[26]

However, even though the focus on the transition from maidenhood to motherhood is crystal clear, the pivotal role as a "teacher" or "trainer" that mother Demeter must have played in this crucial period for her daughter has not sufficiently caught the attention of scholars so far. Some of them indeed mention this transition and speak of training, but they prefer to focus on other aspects of the maiden's *paideia*. Lydie Bodiou, for instance, writes:

> La femme ... vit avec sa fille les étapes qui mènent du "devenir femme" au "devenir mère," de la féminité à la nécessaire maternité ... Devenue *parthénos* [Kore] la cité s'inquiète de son sort. C'est le temps où elle est prise en considération, non pas pour elle-même, mais parce que "mère-à- venir." ... Entre une fille et sa mère, il est question de la transmission d'un savoir, d'initiation aux savoir-faire féminins.
>
> Bodiou 2006: 311, 315, 321

But Bodiou does not go further. Nathalie Ernoult's words sound quite similar:

> il est fort probable que dans la bonne société athénienne, les mères enseignaient à leurs filles comment incarner le rôle social correspondant à l'idéal féminin grec, c'est-à-dire à se préparer à devenir une bonne épouse, une bonne mère qui met au monde un enfant légitime mâle et une femme socialisée qui assure les fonctions religieuses propres à son sexe .... les femmes ... ont vraisemblablement un rôle déterminant au sein de l'*oikos* en transmettant, bien ou mal, à leurs filles les valeurs sociales qui vont définir leur statut au sein de la cité .... Cette transmission se poursuit dans l'enfance et à l'adolescence par l'apprentissage des mythes, ces "contes de bonnes femmes" bannis par Platon comme autant de mensonges sur les dieux mais qui constituent le socle de la formation culturelle des jeunes filles. Les mères initient également leurs filles aux rites, danses et chants, nécessaires à leur participation aux fêtes solennelles que donne la cité en l'honneur des dieux. Elles leur enseignent également toutes les activités liées à la bonne gestion de l'*oikos*.
>
> Ernoult 2015: 1–2

26 British Museum, London, 1885, 0316.1, Hellenistic Terracotta Figures, circa 100 bce: see https://www.bmimages.com/index.asp.

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Even if ancient sources do not clearly attest this, we can easily infer that wom- en's duties also comprised the "savoir-faire féminins" (feminine know-how), such as taking care of an infant, literally keeping children alive, raising, and educating them. These were crucial tasks.

Furthermore, the role of the maternal grandmother deserves mention. A mother was expected to visit her daughter right after childbirth, or if pos- sible, to be present during it. At least one literary example reflects this social reality: in Euripides' *Electra* (vv. 1124–1141), Clytemnestra is tricked into visiting her daughter by a message reporting she has just given birth (which is not true).[27] Additionally, the mother-in-law is another maternal figure that some authors take into consideration. Indeed, after the bride's arrival at her husband's house, during the wedding day, another mother, her mother-in-law, will supervise her (Tognazzi 2015: 26). At that point, however, it is likely that the young woman was expected already to be fully prepared for her new role. Ernoult rightly points out how important this notion and the

duty of transmission to the daughter was for Greek mothers: "La mère qui, pour une raison ou pour l'autre, n'a pas pu accompagner sa fille dans le passage de la *parthenos* à la *nymphe*, ne peut pas voir l'aboutissement de son devoir de transmission" (2015: 4).

This feminine know-how and its transmission probably also had a religious dimension, as in the occasion of the *Arrhephoria* (see Pedrucci and Scapini 2017: 325–339). Helene Foley compares this with situations in other traditional societies: "Typically close to their mothers, as in many traditional societies, girls learnt to be wives from female family members and from participating in religious rituals" (2003: 135). In ancient Greece, being a wife *is* being a mother (Bodiou, Brulé and Pierini 2005; Pedrucci 2015). However, the *Arrhephoria* emphasized "well-known" tasks generally attributed to women, such as weaving, housework, or cooking (Brulé 1987: 99–116), rather than the tasks that we, as scholars, would label ritual or religious. In this context, many rituals performed by mothers and other women attendants likely took place in a domestic context (in contrast, for instance, to those performed at public shrines or temples, although women were not necessarily excluded from these).

However, in spite of a wealth of bibliography on Greek motherhood as an institution and on practical tasks attributed to women, such as weaving (see, for example Andò 2005; Gualerzi 2007), the concrete maternal work of mothering and its transmission remains understudied.

27 The role of the grandmother in educating and supporting her grandchildren is well doc- umented in both Greek and Roman sources. See Pedrucci 2018.

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Notoriously, with very few exceptions, the image we gain of Greek society is constructed on the basis of sources authored by men and reflecting primarily their concerns. "Maternal training" was probably one of the aspects of women's lives most unknown to male authors, who generally did not focus their writings on women's private lives.[28] Yet, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is quite exceptional in this regard: this literary source offers important insights into the education of young women, or, at least, into the representation of some aspects of this training. At some point in the narrative, queen Metaneira interrupts Demeter while she is attempting to confer immortality on baby Demophon by passing him through a fire. The goddess then leaves the baby on the ground. At this moment, his sisters,[29] *rather than his mother*, come to him:

> And straightway Metaneira's knees were loosed and she remained speechless for a long while and did not remember to take up her late- born son from the ground. But his sisters heard his pitiful wailing and sprang down from their well-spread beds: one of them took up the child in her arms and laid him in her bosom, while another revived the fire, and a third rushed with soft feet to bring their mother from her fragrant chamber. And they gathered about the struggling child and washed him, embracing him lovingly; but he was not comforted, because nurses and handmaids[30] much less skillful were holding him now.
>
> *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 281–291[31]

To the audience or readership of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, this probably was not surprising. We suggest reading this as a literary testimony to the fact

28 In this regard, archaeology can be more generous. Véronique Dasen (2004), for instance, has suggested that dolls with drawers served to educate little girls for maternity.

29 Older sisters were likely active agents when their mother gave birth to siblings. They probably also were active agents in religious activities; see McWilliam 2013; Pedrucci 2018. A late author, Ausonius, reports a clear case of maternal

"apprenticeship" by female rela- tives. In his *Parentalia* 27, he writes that his maternal aunt learnt to be a mother by "babysitting" him. We can think of these practices as typical "longue durée" examples.

30 The Greek words are τροφοὶ and τιθῆναι; also see below, p. 426.

31 Τῆς δ᾽αὐτίκα γούναθ᾽ ἕλυντο, δηρὸν δ᾽ἄφθογγος γένετο χρόνον, οὐδέ τιπαιδὸς μνήσατο τηλυγέτοιο ἀπὸ δαπέδου ἀνελέσθαι. τοῦ δὲ κασίγνηταιφωνὴν ἐσάκουσαν ἐλεινήν, κὰδ δ᾽ἄρ᾽ ἀπ᾽εὐστρώτων λεχέων θόρον: ἣ μὲν ἔπειτα παῖδ᾽ἀνὰ χερσὶν ἑλοῦσα ἐῷ ἐγκάθετο κόλπῳ: ἣ δ᾽ἄρα πῦρ ἀνέκαι᾽: ἣ δ᾽ἔσσυτο πόσσ᾽ ἀπαλοῖσι μητέρ᾽ ἀναστήσουσα θυώδεος ἐκ θαλάμοιο. ἀγρόμεναι δέ μιν ἀμφὶς ἑλούεον ἀσπαίροντα ἀμφαγαπαζόμεναι: τοῦ δ᾽οὐ μειλίσσετο θυμός: χειρότεραι γὰρ δή μιν ἔχον τροφοὶ ἠδὲ τιθῆναι (Evelyn-White 1914: 308–309).

[page 425] that young female members of the household were familiar with and trained in taking care of an infant.

The Mother as Birth-Giver, Nurturer, and Trainer

We now turn to analyzing the extent to which this discourse on "maternal training" corresponds to, or reflects on, the divine figures of Demeter and Kore. But first, we wish to link such observations to some key insights we gained from a comparative analysis through editing *Motherhood(s) and Polytheisms*. One of the main research results we achieved is that we clearly demonstrated how much the "construction" of a pantheon is deeply rooted in social reality. This in itself may not be so surprising, but this can give us some insights into women's lives, especially for cultures of the past that we cannot access through research methods such as fieldwork or interviews. Another recurring observation is that mythological narratives in polytheistic systems often (though not always) dissociate the function of mother as "birth-giver" from that of mother as "nurturer." Another woman or, in some cases, a divine or an animal figure can take on the latter function. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, we see this function taken on by the goddess under the guise of an old nurse, and by the older sisters of baby Demophon who is not cared for exclusively by Metaneira, his birth-giver. Several of our case studies suggest that girls were "prepared" for becoming mothers by some older figures in the house, and that many girls would already be assigned maternal — and not just *domestic* — tasks during childhood. Even if we lack explicit sources on this matter, the evidence that we can access tends to show that this myth reflects such a social reality. This reality seems to be in sharp contrast with an "abrupt" transition between childhood and wifehood, as the one recounted in the Kore/Persephone and Demeter myth. Beyond the *lectio facilior* of the narrative, there was probably a more nuanced reality. Archaeological evidence offers less "violent" representations of this myth (see Bodiou 2006: 319). Though this imaginary of a violent abduction is common, the only sources that speak of an explicit abduction of the bride concern Spartan wedding rituals.[32]

Furthermore, for our purpose, it is also relevant to focus on the age of Demeter and Kore. Demeter is, undoubtedly, a mother, but she is a mother to a young woman, not a newborn. Sources, in particular the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, never describe Demeter giving birth, breastfeeding, and rearing a baby, a toddler, or a young child of her own.[33] The only time we see her taking

32 See Plutarch, *Life of Lycurgus* 15.4–6; commented by Tognazzi 2015: 15.

33 The only exception is Hyginus, *Fabulae* 147, in which Demeter feeds Triptolemus with her divine milk.

[page 426] care of an infant is when she plays the role of the old nurse — not that of the *wet*-nurse — caring for someone else's baby son. The goddess is clearly depicted as old, therefore not able to breastfeed. But should human paradigms apply to divine physiology? Demeter's activity in taking care of a child is relat- ed to the verbs τρέφω and τιτθηνέομαι (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 141–144). The former verb means "making a child grow," whereas the latter usually alludes in an explicit way to breastfeeding (Demont 1978; Pirenne-Delforge 2010: 687; Pedrucci 2013: 227–230). These are activities appropriate for her age:

> But may all those who dwell on Olympus give you husbands and birth of children as parents desire, so you take pity on me, maidens, and show me this clearly that I may learn, dear children, to the house of what man and woman I may go, to work for them cheerfully at such tasks as belong to a woman of my age. Well could I nurse a new born child, holding him in my arms, or keep house, or spread my masters' bed in a recess of the well-built chamber, or teach the women their work.
>
> *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 135–144[34]

En passant, this part of the hymn confirms that getting married and having children was considered as the best thing to wish young maidens, and their parents, too. This hymn is even more precise about Demophon's feeding:

> And the child grew like some immortal being, not fed with food nor nourished at the breast: for by day rich-crowned Demeter would anoint him with ambrosia as if he were the offspring of a god and breathe sweetly upon him as she held him in her bosom.
>
> *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 235–238[35]

Since the child grew like some immortal being, not fed with food nor nourished at the breast, we can infer that the verb τιτθηνέομαι, and Demeter's

34 Ἀλλ᾽ ὑμῖν μὲν πάντες Ὀλύμπια δώματ᾽ ἔχοντες δοῖεν κουριδίους ἄνδρας, καὶ τέκνα τεκέσθαι, ὡς ἐθέλουσι τοκῆες: ἐμὲ δ᾽ αὖτ᾽ οἰκτείρατε, κοῦραι. [τοῦτο δέ μοι σαφέως ὑποθήκατε, ὄφρα πύθωμαι,] προφρονέως, φίλα τέκνα, τέων πρὸς δώμαθ᾽ ἵκωμαι ἀνέρος ἠδὲ γυναικός, ἵνα σφίσιν ἐργάζωμαι πρόφρων, οἷα γυναικὸς ἀφήλικος ἔργα τέτυκται: καὶ κεν παῖδα νεογνὸν ἐν ἀγκοίνῃσιν ἔχουσα καλὰ τιθηνοίμην καὶ δώματα τηρήσαιμι καί κε λέχος στορέσαιμι μυχῷ θαλάμων εὐπήκτων δεσπόσυνον καί κ᾽ ἔργα διδασκήσαιμι γυναῖκας (Evelyn-White 1914: 298–299).

35 Ὣς δ᾽ ἀέξετο δαίμονι ἶσος, οὔτ᾽ οὖν σῖτον ἔδων, οὐ θησάμενος [γάλα μητρὸς ἠματίη μὲν γὰρ καλλιστέφανος] Δημήτηρ χρίεσκ᾽ ἀμβροσίῃ ὡσεὶ θεοῦ ἐκγεγαῶτα ἡδὺ καταπνείουσα καὶ ἐν κόλποισιν ἔχουσ" (Evelyn-White 1914: 304–307).

[page 427] agency in general, has to be understood at a non-human level. Demeter wants to render this boy immortal. In order to do so she uses divine "means": she anoints Demophon with ambrosia as if he were the offspring of a god and breathes upon him as she holds him in her bosom. As a divine κουροτρόφος, she would have taken Demophon under her protection until ἥβη, that is, puberty (Pirenne-Delforge 2010: 687–688).

In the case of Demeter and of other "major" goddesses, therefore, the biological aspects of maternity practically never come to the foreground. Their ma- ternities concern especially protection and help in growing. The Greek word for this is *kourotrophia*, meaning "making a child grow" (see Pedrucci 2013, 2017b; Pedrucci and Scapini 2017). Borrowing from maternal theory, we classify this as a "distal" strategy of parenting (Keller *et al*. 2009; Räuchle 2015): the mother is not the only one who can engage in such nurturing, but other female relatives and caregivers can do so as well. Socially, however, a Kore/κόρη, the young woman in Greece, is already a mother in the sense that she is not only a "wife in training," but also a "mother in training." While growing up, she is likely reminded of and shaped into this (future) identity: either because she could see motherhood and maternal work all around her, as such work was not as "hidden" as it is in our contemporary "Western" society; or, especially (but not exclusively) in the case of poorer families with no servants, slaves, or helpers, because a girl was required to help with infant care on a regular basis (which is different from occasionally "babysitting" younger children). Anthropologists have documented similar social expectations for girls in other cultures.[36]

In several images from Southern Italy, we see a young woman, possibly Kore, opening a basket with a baby inside (Cosentino 2017), something we may interpret as an allusion to her training as a mother.[37] Here, we have to point out that Kore never becomes a mother.[38] Yet, as we stated at the beginning, our principal effort should be directed at contextualizing the myth with great attention and not at attempting to find an "overall" consistency within different narratives. As mythological figures, Demeter and Kore stand together as timeless

36 David Lancy (2015: 136–140) offers examples of alloparenting, which include older girls engaging in such maternal (and not just domestic) care work.

37 We should point out, however, that Locri Epizefirii, with distinct sanctuaries for Persephone and Demeter, represents an isolated case. The focus on Persephone as a bride here is peculiar and so is the association/dissociation between the mother and the daughter, as attested by the distinct sanctuaries. See also Sabbione and Macrì 2008.

38 The only exception is the Orphic tradition on Zagreus; see Photius, s.v. *Zagreus*. According to Bruit Zaidman (2012b: 43), Persephone's marriage is sterile, since it takes place in the underworld. It is a fascinating theory, although not fully convincing for us. However, it would definitely deserve an in-depth analysis.

[page 428] symbols of this moment of transition between maidenhood, wifehood, *and then* motherhood. While contemplating these goddesses, historically situated and embodied women surely remembered — or learned soon enough — that pregnancies and babies would follow their marriage. The mythological narrative, however, focuses on this crucial transition rather than on the effective beginning of motherhood through pregnancy and childbirth.

Concluding Remarks

Our interdisciplinary perspective in this article, as historians and scholars of religions collaborating to study both contemporary and past traditions, does not exhaust the analysis of this specific case study of Demeter. One of our goals was to bring research on a goddess of ancient Greece into conversation with scholarship in motherhood studies, which tends to focus on contemporary issues and contexts. We were interested in depictions of figures that we access mostly through the mediation of male authors for whom motherhood as an institution rarely was a central issue, and even less so mothering as women's (and others') own experience.

This case study allows us to argue that reading sources that are not written by or attributed to mothers through the lenses of maternal theory, and with caution, can still let us gain some insight, as limited as it might be, into mother*ing*, and not only into mother*hood*, in the classical world. These scarce sources attributed to male authors are the only material available to us. Discarding them as irrelevant just because they do not give us access to authentic feminine or maternal voices would not be pragmatic, and this would leave us with nothing to work on. While reading such sources through maternal theory, we gain some new perspectives on religion, mainly through a more precise understanding of how the role of female deities as mothers was conceived in ancient Greek culture. This role was primarily that of *kourotrophos*, which leaves in the background the more biological aspects of motherhood such as pregnancy and childbirth. This is the case also for De-*mētēr*, the mother par excellence of the Greek pantheon. Moreover, through this analysis of two goddesses and their relationship, we gain insights into how literary sources jointly construct and represent as intertwined two deities not as enemies, as is often the case, but as peers and as, to a great extent, complementary. In this regard, by focusing on the role of Demeter as "maternal trainer," we offer an innovative interpretation of the Eleusinian myth. Could this also give us important clues about the real lives of mothers in the ancient Greek world? To answer this

question, more research is needed as the specifically maternal training of young girls indeed [page 429] remains a neglected topic in the study of ancient history as well as in the study of religions.

Referring to some of the key tenets of maternal theory, we have highlighted that one of the roles of Demeter in Greek mythology is that of "maternal trainer" for her daughter, a mother-to-be. This role seems common in the ancient world and elsewhere, and it is thus maybe not so surprising to see it reflected in a source such as the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.[39] In Greek and Roman societies, the mother was not the *only* — or not even the *main* — caregiver of the child (Dixon 1988; Pedrucci and Scapini 2017). This contrasts with perspectives on motherhood recently developed in Western societies and more specifically, as Sharon Hays puts it, the ideology of "intensive mothering" (see note 12), according to which "good mothers" should always place their children at the center of their lives, defer to the guidance of experts, and dedicate all their emotional, temporal, and financial resources to educating their children, being their main or sole caregiver.

As recent publications in the study of religions demonstrate (Ohnuma 2012; Lofton 2016; Pasche Guignard, Pedrucci and Scapini 2017), the discipline still has room to uncover a plurality of rarely studied maternal discourses, representations, figures, and practices, both human and divine and everything in between, beyond the more classical topics such as mother goddesses or fertility and childbirth rituals. Works that take a comparative scope (such as Pasche Guignard, Pedrucci, and Scapini 2017) befitting the study of religions highlight how notions that many still take for granted, such as that of maternal love and care, are not the primary focus or are even absent in many contexts and religious sources. Such a shift in focus has helped us reconsider Demeter and other characters in the mythological narrative of the *Homeric Hymn*. Borrowing from motherhood studies the articulation of the two maternal functions as "birth-giver" and "nurturer," we found very rich expressions of these in the mythology of the ancient world. This particularly relevant theoretical element, combined with our broader comparative survey of maternal figures in other religious traditions (see note 10), has allowed us to highlight some of the specificities of Demeter in her relationship with her daughter and to resituate her narrative and the religious practices dedicated to her, in particular the *Thesmophoria* festival.

39 From the prehistoric Levant to the Celtic world, we find these joint figures of two women, sometimes a young woman together with an older one. In Celtic cultures, there are three women, and in some cases they are of clearly different ages: they likely are the mother or mother-to-be, her mother and the wet-nurse. In ancient Latium we find two women with two or even more children; see Ducaté Paarmann 2013; Cultraro 2017; Dugast 2017.

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Taking the "mother turn" in the study of religions might bring about some radical reconsiderations about not only gender, women, and mothers, but also about key topics such as power, authority, ritual, prescriptions regarding (im)purity, conceptions of birth, life and death, cosmologies, myth, kinship, filiation, figures of mother goddesses, the notion of "care" central to feminist theory, as well as other topics. This can be achieved only through taking into account the dual dimension of maternity: both motherhood as an institution and mothering as women's own practices and experiences. The other epistemological distinction between "woman" and "mother," promoted in matricentric feminist theory, is crucial as well, especially when our ancient and religious sources tend constantly to take us back in the opposite conceptual direction, that which conflates "woman" with "mother." Such considerations do not dismiss, but rather build upon the considerable scholarship that has revisited the historical and social study of religions using "gender" as a critical category of analysis. As we have shown in this article, the interdisciplinary potential between motherhood studies and the study of religions is fruitful and remains to be carefully explored further. For this reason, we call for making such interdisciplinary and cross-cultural comparative scholarship on motherhood, mothering, and mothers more visible within the study of religions in both past and present contexts.

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