

“ξανθή” in the Hymn to Demeter

Implications for interpretation

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Greek 607
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In the *Hymn to Demeter*, Demeter (or her hair) is twice described as ξανθή (lines 279 and 302), typically glossed as “yellow”. This investigation will consider the possible range of translations for this word, and the implications it may have on how these translations affect our interpretations of the scene in which the word appears.

Both occurrences of the word ξανθή appear in the scene where Demeter casts off her disguise as an old woman and reveals herself to the family of Celeus as a goddess. The passage at 279 (277-280) reads:

ὄδμη δ' ἱμερόεσσα θυγέντων ἀπὸ πέπλων
σκίδνατο, τῆλε δὲ φέγγος ἀπὸ χροὸς ἀθανάτοιο
λάμπε θεᾶς, ξανθαὶ δὲ κόμαι κατενήνοθεν ὤμους,
αὐγῆς δ' ἐπλήσθη πυκινὸς δόμος ἀστεροπιῆς ὄς. (280) (Gaisser)

Beauty spread round about her and a lovely fragrance was wafted from her sweet smelling robes, and from the divine body of the goddess a light shone afar, while *golden* tresses spread down over her shoulders, so that the strong house was filled with brightness as with lightning. (Evelyn-White)

The second occurrence of the word appears shortly thereafter at line 302 (302-304):

ἀτὰρ ξανθὴ Δημήτηρ
ἔνθα καθεζομένη μακάρων ἀπὸ νόσφιν ἀπάντων
μίμνε πόθῳ μινύθουσα βαθυζώνοιο θυγατρὸς. (304) (Gaisser)

But *golden-haired* Demeter sat there apart from all the blessed gods and stayed, wasting with yearning for her deep-bosomed daughter. (Evelyn-White)

In both these cases, the Evelyn-White translation uses the word “golden” or “golden-haired” to render this word. While seemingly straightforward from the typical gloss, this appears more suspect when we consult either Cunliffe or Liddell & Scott. The latter provides “yellow, of various shades, freq. with a tinge of red, brown, auburn”. (Liddell and Scott) “Brown” or “auburn” is a far cry from “golden”. Several questions, therefore, arise from these passages:

What justifications are possible for seeing Demeter as blonde, as opposed to only relatively fair-haired for a Greek, i.e. brown-haired?

What are the implications for how we read the description of Demeter here in this scene?

What kind of an image is being invoked here in the Greek mind?

If Demeter was truly seen as blonde, then she would have stood out among the Greeks as being particularly unusual. According to Pontikos, perhaps only 2% of Greek statuary provides evidence for blondness among the Greeks. Taking the genetic identity of Greeks to be fairly consistent over time, as well as other factors, Pontikos argues that while there was a minority recessive trait for blondness present among the Greeks, the usage of terms like ξανθή (or ξανθός) are more likely to have represented a darker pigmentation that is suggested by our word blonde. (Pontikos) An adult, then, with natural blonde hair would not have been unknown, but also not particularly common. If statuary are to be any judge of the general population, then blondness would have occurred at about the same rate as those who qualify for Mensa, or to use another comparison in our modern culture, as men who are taller than 6’3”.

Pontikos also notes that incidents of blondes in the native Greek population tend to be blonde in youth, but that as the children grow to maturity, their hair darkens to brown or black. (Pontikos) Blondness, therefore, may perhaps be seen as a sign of perpetual youth, and this could relate very closely to the perception of the gods as being immortal, and my own impression that there are more blondes among the Greek gods than would have appeared in the general population (per capita).

The question of whether the use of ξανθή to describe Demeter is enough to determine that she was indeed blonde remains, since the human characters described by this same word are often not interpreted to be blonde. Other source material beyond the *Hymn to Demeter* can help resolve that question, but such material is largely beyond the scope of this paper. However, other gods and goddesses are also described with terms suggesting that they too are blond. Leto in the *Hymn to Apollo* is described as χρυσοπλόκαμος, or “golden-haired” (Smith and Percy), and Aphrodite in the *Iliad*, as χρύση “golden”. (Cunliffe) In the case of both Aphrodite and Demeter, these epithets appear to be traditional, i.e. that Aphrodite is not typically described as ξανθή and Demeter not as χρύση. This may suggest a difference in hair colour, or merely represent metrical considerations. That there are other blonde goddesses suggests that ξανθή may indeed be interpreted this way in the case of Demeter, but without additional descriptors to narrow down the interpretation, this remains uncertain based on this one word alone.

Another possible reason to conceive of Demeter as a blonde would be her association with her role as grain goddess. Here, the epithet invoking the image of the young grain, is used with a kind of irony (Richardson), to draw a contrast being her duties as the goddess of harvest and abundance, which she is neglecting, and is about to neglect further. After she leaves the house of Celeus, she locks herself away in her new temple and a long famine begins wherein the

grain (barley) will not grow. An auburn-haired Demeter would not invoke this association quite so successfully.

The observations of Pontikos on the rarity of the blonde trait among the human Greek population can be invoked here to provide another layer of meaning to the scene as well. Prior to revealing herself as a goddess, Demeter had been disguised as an old woman. Since no description is given of her appearance, we may assume it was typical of older Greek women: once dark hair, now graying. Since she is expected to still be able to nurse a young child, it's unlikely that she was old enough to have gone completely grey. The unremarkableness of her appearance could certainly be interpreted to mean that she had concealed her normally fair hair. However, once she allows her disguise to fall away, the first thing that is revealed and commented on is the ξανθαὶ δὲ κόμαι “golden-tresses” that fall over her shoulders. This revelation draws two sharp contrasts with her previous appearance.

The first is simply the remarkable change in colour, from dark to a much lighter blonde. The combination of her remarkable change in appearance, together with the light radiating around her, emphasizes the otherworldliness of her transformation. While black hair exposed to bright light can take on the appearance of a lighter, redder brown, a shade that might be covered by the word ξανθή when used to describe mortals and horses, the use of the word here probably is intended to represent a genuine break with her disguise, rather than just an apparent one. In such a case, the sharper the contrast the word is meant to invoke, the sharper the break between the disguise and the revealed reality will be.

Enhancing this effect still further, however, is the association of blondness with Greek youth. As the appearance of the old woman falls away and is replaced by the blonde hair characteristic of the very young, the author is further able to enhance the contrast between her

former human appearance, and her present, immortal one. The associations invoked in the mind between Demeter and the golden-haired goddess of beauty, or the golden-haired god of the sun, suggest that the image here serves to cement the relationship between the immortals and the woman standing before them. The sharp break is necessary to inspire the appropriate level of awe, and to leave no doubt in the minds of the audience who and what these women are faced with, and to justify Metaneira's reaction, of simply falling to the floor cowering in fear and abandoning her own child, as being completely appropriate.

Based on these three factors, it seems likely from contextual evidence that ξανθή does indeed here suggest a much lighter colour than it might in another context. The invocation of the image of the grain, and the sharp break with her disguise, simply don't work as well if we imagine Demeter with a shade of hair more on the order of auburn than blonde. Only blonde can provide the kind of stark visual image that signals to the listener that something profound has changed. We are to see this scene as a turning point in the narrative, where Demeter realizes her power as a goddess, as opposed to her previous powerlessness, and paves the way for Zeus and Hades to recognize her divine rights as well as the eventual return of her daughter. (Felson-Rubin and Deal) If so, then the sharp contrast we draw here visually serves to further that aim as well.

In summary, then, despite the wide range of possible values for ξανθή in other contexts, here it seems mostly likely that we do indeed need to interpret it as blonde or golden-haired. Further support might be had for this claim by finding other sources that describe Demeter with other words that also suggest fair-haired, and which can't mean "anything lighter than black". (Pontikos) It would also be interesting to examine more closely the incidence of blondes among the gods and compare that to the Greek population as a whole. My impression that fair-

hairedness is used to signal divine origin or heroic status can really only be verified by looking at the true distribution of terms for fair-haired, including ξανθός.

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