

Imaginative Intelligence of Hermes in the Homeric Hymn IV, The Hymn to Hermes

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Imaginative Intelligence of Hermes in the *Homeric Hymn IV*, *The Hymn to Hermes*

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The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* and the second song of Demodokos in the *Odyssey* (8.266-369) share some common features: both are characterised by an emphasis on contrivance, witty treatment of the gods, a light-hearted tone, and most particularly, by the concept of victory of the inferior over the superior. Yet, in spite of these conceptual similarities, the two texts are quite different in their narratological point of view.

In their respective narratives, Hermes in the *Hymn* and Hephaistos in the *Odyssey* are both celebrated for their skill in deception and lying. This suggests that the archaic poets are interested in exploiting qualities that are associated with the trickster, and that they see deceptive skill in a positive light. In these texts, the contrivance of Hermes and Hephaistos is typically allied to their attempts to overcome their adversaries, and the different narrative techniques used in the two texts have an important influence on the presentation of the characters and on the structure of each text. Since I have discussed on Hephaistos in my previous essay,¹ it is the aim of this essay to look first at the ways in which Hermes is represented, and, second, at how these narrative devices work within the *Hymn*.

1

Hermes has perhaps the most complex character of any deity in Greek mythology. The unity of this hymn has been much challenged, and the episodes which I will discuss have been called “apparently separate threads”.² However, I would suggest that these episodes are, in fact, thematically coherent: there is a major theme which gives unity to the hymn as a whole. This unifying “thread” is that of the craft (*τέχνη*) and contrivance (*δόλος*), with which the baby Hermes rivals his powerful

brother, Apollo, and eventually wins his rightful place among the Olympians.

Although the subject - an inferior overcoming a superior by trickery - is similar to the theme of Demodokos' second song, the mode of presentation differs. The most significant difference can be related to the context: for encomiastic reasons, Hermes' handicap requires cautious treatment. That is, his disadvantage must not be over-emphasised. The motif of "overcoming the superior" becomes a much more delicate issue than in Demodokos' second song. Although the rivalry between Hermes and Apollo is one of the main subjects of this hymn - Apollo's name is mentioned even in the compendium of Hermes' function at the beginning of the hymn (22) - Hermes' final aim is not to usurp Apollo's position, but to stand on equal terms with him: thus, their conflict ends in reconciliation. A full portrait of Hermes is presented, characteristically in the process of narrating his *technē* and contrivance, which function as the effective means for opposing Apollo.

2

The word *technē* is a key to understanding both Hermes' nature and the nature of his contrivance. We can observe a threefold classification of the use of *technē*: the *technē* involved in making and playing the lyre (447, 465, 483) and *syrinx* (411), and producing fire (108); the *technē* associated with deception (76, 317); the *technē* which encapsulates all of Hermes' activities, including both practical and deceitful skill (166, 317).

The manufacture of the lyre by the baby Hermes - a strikingly lovely episode - illustrates the first use of *technē*. In this detailed description, the hymn shows considerable difference to the other extant accounts about Hermes: Sophocles (*Ichneutai* fr. 314-8 Pearson) and Apollodoros (3.10.2) make the episode of the lyre follow the theft of the cattle³. In these two works, the link between the theft of the cattle and the making of the lyre has a logical explanation⁴, but the treatment in the hymn has its own significance: by narrating it as the first manifestation of Hermes'

technē, the hymn gives much more emphasis to the creative art involved in the invention of the lyre. As the effect of this focalised arrangement, the hymn successfully proclaims that the lyre is Hermes' invention, opposing another tradition that it was Apollo's invention;⁵ moreover, it emphasises Hermes' creativity.

Hermes finds a tortoise on his way to steal Apollo's cattle (24), and at once he gains "endless delight" (*μυρίον ὄλβον*, 24). Hermes himself identifies the tortoise, in his speech, as a *μέγα σύμβολον* (30). A *σύμβολον* is an omen of good luck which a person meets on his journey, and it is termed a *ἔρμαιον*⁶: Hermes himself finds his first *ἔρμαιον* here. The hymn depicts his creative intelligence by showing the association of Hermes with this word. Hermes at once realises the potential of the tortoise, seeing how he can make the lyre from it. It is only Hermes who realises that the tortoise will produce music. This is the positive side of his *metis*, and relates to his enjoyment of craft.

In the hymn, Hermes performs two songs on his lyre: first, his own hymn to Hermes (54-61); second, the hymn to the gods (427-433), which charms Apollo. Hermes understands the power of music: the lyre soothes Apollo's anger. The description of Apollo's response to the music particularly emphasises the charm and enjoyment that Hermes' music brings: Apollo laughed with joy (420-1), "sweet longing" (*γλυκὺς ἴμερος*) took hold of his heart (422), and an "irresistible love" (*ἔρος ἀμήχανος*) seized him (434). This means that the music of the lyre brings relief from sorrow; once Apollo listens to the lyre, he appreciates its full value, and willingly exchanges it for his fifty cattle (436-7). Apollo is by no means cheated - he considers it a genuine exchange.

The lyre, in this way, helps Hermes in his crisis. Thus, when the tortoise was first found, it was rightly called the source of "endless happiness" (*μυρίος ὄλβος*, 24), "being profitable" (*ὀνήσιμος*, 30) and "helpful" to Hermes (*ὄφελος*, 34; *ὀνήσεις*, 35): transformed into the lyre, the tortoise becomes profitable and helpful for him. Although Zeus

suggests that Hermes and Apollo be reconciled (391-4) later in this hymn, the decisive role in their reconciliation is played by the lyre. The prominent presentation of the lyre in the first episode in the hymn is thus balanced by its prominent role at the end.

But, the lyre has another aspect: Hermes' words describing the lyre illustrate an ambivalence which also functions to represent the ambivalence of Hermes' own nature. When Hermes sees the shell, he describes it as *αἰόλον ὄστρακον* (33). The word *αἰόλος* has double meaning: here it presumably means "shining", but the predominant sense of the word is "quick-moving"⁷. Application of this word to the tortoise is not only sarcastic but also highly allusive - the tortoise is slow while living, but, after death, transformed into a lyre, it vibrates quickly. This second connotation is emphasised particularly when, at 31, the lyre is described as an accompaniment of the dance. The slow-quick dichotomy is also applied to Hermes himself: as he is a baby, he ought to be slow; in fact, he is extraordinarily quick-moving. The emphasis on the tortoise's profitability is also double-edged: the profit is only on Hermes' side; for the tortoise it is an utter calamity. This illustrates the ambivalent nature of the luck and profit brought by Hermes: luck and profit for one can be bad luck and loss for another.

The life and death of the tortoise are placed in enigmatic contrast in the two lines of Hermes' speech (37-8):

Living, you will be a spell against bewitching that causes
manifold sorrow

But if you die, then you will sing most beautiful songs.

Tortoise blood, flesh or gall was used as a remedy for headache, toothache, and other complaints⁸, and the protective power of a live tortoise as a charm was also known⁹. The narrative appears to draw a sharp contrast between the role of the tortoise in life and death, yet, the boundary remains ambiguous; what is said of the living tortoise is also

applicable to the dead tortoise: the tortoise should be killed as a practical medical remedy for suffering; the dead tortoise can provide an emotional relief from sorrow through its music. This alludes to the magical power of music, as when Apollo is charmed by the sound (discussed above). From another point of view, this account may refer to Hermes' function as *ψυχοπομπός*, the guide across the boundary between life and death¹⁰. It may possibly be said that Hermes makes the tortoise immortal: he transforms the mortal tortoise into music, the value of which lasts forever.¹¹

Another ambivalent aspect of the lyre can be seen in the description of its production, viz, the sharp contrast between the cruelty involved in its manufacture and the light-toned profitability of its final form.

Then throwing it upon its back¹² by the knife of grey iron
He cut the marrow of the mountain-dwelling tortoise (41-2).

This description makes explicit the cruelty needed for Hermes' *techne*, and is emphasised in the contrasting picture of the tortoise feeding peacefully on the grass (26-8). This is what Hermes' *techne* does: it produces a profitable instrument at the cost of a harmless tortoise. As the result of the magical and dangerous nature of the lyre, when it is played, it sounds awesomely (*σμερδαλέον*, 55, 402, 502).¹³ The work of *techne* is thus double-edged: Hermes makes a plaything by depriving a tortoise of its life; the lyre is lovely but resonates with a dangerous sound.

When Hermes makes this lyre, his swiftness is emphasised:¹⁴ immediately after birth, he goes out and finds the tortoise; at once he gets the idea of making a lyre, and accomplishes it - thus, "he planned and did it at once" (46). The two similes of swift thought and the whirling glances of the eyes (43-5) have a double effect: they are the similes relevant to Hermes' swift thinking in his making the lyre; and at the same time they describe Hermes' own swift thinking and his own whirling glance. Although they are similes, they themselves uniquely visualise Hermes'

nature: his intelligence and artful skill is characteristically rapid.

Producing fire (*πυρὸς τέχνη*, 108) is another example of Hermes' inventiveness and is also the earliest extant description of the primitive method of producing fire.¹⁵ The hymn seems to presuppose knowledge of the myth of Prometheus' fire:¹⁶ the narrative deliberately focuses on the process and specific skills required to make fire¹⁷. It is as if the hymn proclaims that Hermes' fire is a fire resulting from his *technē*, and, thus, different to the *stolen* fire of Prometheus. The detailed account begins with his trimming of a shining branch of laurel with the iron knife (109).¹⁸ Mention of laurel is remarkable, because it suggests rivalry with Apollo. By using Apollo's sacred tree as his instrument, Hermes is threatening Apollo's domain. This implication is especially important, because his fire is for the preparation of sacrificial meat¹⁹, by which he demonstrates his equality with the other Olympians (116-29)²⁰. Hermes is eager to receive the same honour (*τιμῆ*, 172) as Apollo, joining the assembly of gods on equal terms. Fire, therefore, is important for Hermes' rivalry with Apollo, both in the process of its invention and in its use.

The ingenious example of Hermes' *technē* combined with his skill in deception is illustrated in his ruse when he steals the cattle of Apollo. At the sandy place they have to cross, Hermes makes the cattle walk backwards to avoid detection of the stolen cows' tracks (75-8),²¹ and he weaves sandals of tamarisk and myrtle twigs to disguise his own footprints (79-81)²². The text gives scanty information about the shape and function of the sandals; he uses fresh wood and leaves, and weaves them into the "unspeakable and unthinkable" things (80). The only substantial description of the sandals in this passage is that they are "light" (*κοῦφα*, 83). They may be soft, because he uses young leaves (82); it may also relate to the requirement of comfort for those who, swift and untiringly, hasten on long journeys (85-6).

Apollo's first response to the footprints is puzzlement: he decides that

they cannot be tracks of man, woman, bear, lion or centaur (222-4), because they are monstrous (*πέλωρα*) and swift (225).²³ The “monstrous” footprint may in theory mean big, wide in stride, and possibly heavy. A few more details of the sandals are given when Apollo talks about them before Zeus. They are again “monstrous and double tracks” (342); they are not the marks of feet or hands; and are as if someone might walk on “slender timbers” (*ἄραι ἦσι δρυσί*, 349). The relation between this “slender timber” and the sandals is uncertain: Hermes’ device may resemble skis (snowshoes) or, as Chadwick suggests, wooden stilts.²⁴ In terms of the wide space and heaviness of the tracks, the stilts might be possible, but they do not match the description of the sandals, and “lightness” might be more appropriate than “heaviness” for the tracks (from Apollo’s words, *πόσι καρπαλίμοισιν*, 225)²⁵.

Hermes’ identity is three times questioned, once by the narrative, twice by Apollo; the cumulative effect is to emphasise Hermes’ peculiar characteristic of elusiveness. Apollo, still ignorant of Hermes’ exact device, concludes that Hermes made the tracks using his *metis* (348), and admits that he is “impossible to seize” (*ἀμήχανος* 346). Like the invention of the lyre, his sandals are the product of his creative intelligence. They are praised by the narrator as “wonderful works” (*θαυματὰ ἔργα* 80), and the same word is used by Apollo (*μέγα θαῦμα* 219). Significantly, Apollo expresses his surprise in positive terms: he admires the unexpected and marvellous *technē* and *metis* that created the ruse.

These sandals have, however, a double purpose: they are not only useful to disguise his tracks, but also comfortable. They are soft and light, and are protection for his soft, baby feet. Thus Hermes is able to mention the softness of his feet (273) – unsuited for walking on the rough ground, and being unharmed – when he is accused of theft by Apollo. Although his aim is deception, Hermes is perfectly truthful in this respect: his self-defence is tenable in the face of evidence.²⁶ The sandals are thus a deceptive device against Apollo, and also profitable for his own use.

Hermes' devices are successful: Apollo is deceived and cannot find his cattle until Hermes reveals the hiding place. Apollo comes to Kullene to look for his cattle (246-8), as he believes that they are in Maia and Hermes' cave. Although Apollo has received information from the old man of Onchestos (208-11) and from the omen of the bird (213-4), he nevertheless fails to discover Hermes' trick. Thus, Hermes' deceptive skill is superior to Apollo's intellect and power of prophecy.

3

Speeches in this hymn have a special significance: they are the only places where Hermes' disadvantage is presented. Since Hermes' adverse circumstances are the subject of careful treatment, they are expressed in his own words, and reinforced by Zeus (331) and Apollo (336). He is a neonate, and it is this handicap which acts as the most persuasive excuse. Furthermore, the gap between his age and his cunning emphasises his cleverness. Hermes' speeches also present a positive interpretation of thievishness: aspects of chicanery which contribute to the amusing tone to the hymn.

Hermes makes three speeches: to his mother Maia (163-181), to Apollo (261-277), and to Zeus (378-386). The point of his first speech is that it is good to obtain wealth even if it is attained by unjust means (stealing). Important emphasis is given to the justification that he is less powerful than Apollo, being a new-born baby. He claims that to protect his own rights, he is allowed to get some of the treasure of Apollo, who has many more offerings (178-81).

His second speech to Apollo is highly deceptive and mixes truth and falsehood. From the beginning of the speech, he is strategic;

Are you coming here to seek cattle in the field?

I have not seen them; I have not heard of them; no one had told me of them. (262-3)

He points out the absurdity of Apollo's coming to his dwelling to search for cattle "of the field": he cunningly averts the point of argument from being attacked for his theft to the absurdity of seeking the cattle at such an inappropriate place. When he says that "he has not seen, he has not heard of them" (263), he implies that ἐνθάδε (262) is still active in this line: "I have not seen them *here*, I have not heard of them *here*".²⁷

A similar type of subtle argument is developed in this same speech (270-2):

This would be a great marvel among the immortal gods,
That a new born child should pass in through the doorway of
the house,
With cattle of the field; you speak extravagantly.

Hermes does steal the cattle but he does not actually enter through the door of the house with the cattle, since he left them at Pylos near the Alpheios (101); moreover, he came through the keyhole like the autumn breeze (146-7). Averting the rebuke of Apollo with such a tricky speech, he never forgets to underscore it with mention of his neonate status. This is a persuasive point: nobody can deny that it is ridiculous to imagine a baby stealing cattle. And, his judicious use of the same words as Apollo for this work (μέγα θαῦμα, 270; Apollo in 219) precludes any counterattack by Apollo.

Hermes' claim to powerlessness is plausible: "I was born yesterday, and my feet are soft, and the ground beneath is rough" (273). His argument is double-edged: on the one hand, his words are true, so no one, not even Apollo, can deny them; on the other hand, his argument expresses the motive for the theft as proclaimed in his speech to his mother – since he is feeble and powerless, he is allowed to steal from the wealthy. In this agonistic context the full potential of Hermes' adversity is realised.

In evaluating of the dispute, the hymn is perfectly correct to say that Apollo speaks the truth, whereas Hermes tries to deceive Apollo (*ἤθελεν ἐξαπατᾶν*, 318) with trickery and cunning words. The words *ἤθελεν* (318) in the narrative implies that he is not completely successful in his intent to deceive Apollo. Although it is rather strange that Apollo is called *πολυμήχανος* (319), the hymn seems to imply that Apollo is shrewd enough not to be deceived by Hermes, while Hermes is called *πολύμητις* (319) implying the excellence of both his *techné* and the deceptive speech. This may also, perhaps, provide a link between Hermes and Odysseus' wily intelligence.²⁸

While they are arguing, Apollo resorts to violence, and carries Hermes away. In a sense this is what Hermes intended: as long as Apollo is speaking the truth, Hermes cannot perfectly persuade him. However, when Apollo has recourse to violence, in spite of his obvious advantage of strength, Hermes has the grounds on which to criticise him. Hermes needs to demonstrate this "unfair" position to one in authority, so he willingly takes the problem to Zeus.²⁹ Indeed, it is Hermes who takes the initiative in this process: he suggests a judgement before Zeus (312), and he walks in front, with Apollo following (320-1).

Before Zeus, Hermes does not mention his theft lest he should tell a lie. It is his strategy to appeal against his unfair treatment by Apollo, in the bloom of youth, who threatens Hermes, the new-born baby (373-6): artfully he uses his adverse situation as the critical point of his claim to Zeus. Hermes knows that he cannot overcome the more powerful Apollo face to face, but the presence of an outside arbitrator who may have sympathy with the weaker's disadvantaged position (and besides appreciates intelligence and cunning) may bring him a more favourable result. Thus, carefully insistent upon "fairness", he adroitly concludes his speech, asking Zeus to aid the younger (386).

His strategy is successful, and he is not punished by Zeus. However, interestingly enough, the hymn says that it is Zeus, not Hermes, who

persuades (396) – although the narrative contains no words of Zeus in this argumentative scene. This implies that Hermes could not convince them of his innocence: everybody knows that he is telling a lie. The first words of his speech to Zeus recall the famous paradox in the lie of the Cretan: “I am not telling a lie” (369) – that is, Hermes’ words indicate that he is speaking falsely.

4

Representations of emotional effect in the narrative are worth scrutinising for the overall interpretation of the hymn. In particular, the descriptions of laughter and eyes are of vital importance; the former act as the first step towards reconciliation, the latter displays Hermes’ inner mind. Despite Hermes’ deceptive speeches to Apollo and to Zeus, he is not punished, but, rather, they laugh (Apollo, 281; Zeus, 389), even though his speech did not prove his innocence.³⁰ When Apollo listened to Hermes’ speech, he could have been resentful, instead of “softly laughing” (*ἀπαλδὸν γελάσας*, 281), since he still firmly believes in Hermes’ guilt. In fact, he continues to accuse Hermes (282-292). However, the soft laughter of Apollo does demonstrate the atmosphere of their conflict. The mention of laughter suggests that it will not develop into a more serious quarrel: their argument (313-8) resembles a mock debate.

Apollo’s laughter is a mark of his appreciation of Hermes’ cleverness³¹, and his smile implies that, to a certain extent, he approves of Hermes’ behaviour. Of course, he wishes to get his cattle back, and does not mean to forgive Hermes’ theft, but, by laughing, he reveals that he appreciates Hermes’ cunning. Laying aside the fact that he has been robbed of his cattle, Apollo can be amused by Hermes’ trickery. This generous attitude comes from the recognition, in Apollo’s view, that he is more powerful than the new-born Hermes.³²

When Hermes denies his robbery, Zeus laughs out loud (*μέγ’ ἐξεγέλασεν*, 389)³³. This laughter is exactly what Hermes desired, and recalls Athena’s smile at Odysseus’ lie (*Od.* 13.287). Her smile shows

that she is amused by it, and she admires Odysseus' deceptive skill, though she is, as well as Zeus, by no means deceived by his lies. Just like the positive interpretation of Odysseus' lie, here too, Zeus appreciates Hermes' lie as a manifestation of imaginative intelligence, and regards it as an amusing performance. Zeus' laughter, furthermore, ensures that both sides can claim "victory" of a sort .

Strangely enough, however, Zeus does not offer any comment on Apollo's truthfulness, and moreover, he does not even use the scales of justice that were prepared for them (324). The final verdict is arbitrary:³⁴ it is laughter, rather than the scales, that solves the quarrel. This shows, on one hand, that the hymn is not concerned to establish "truth"; on the other hand, this implies that intelligence allied with trickery cannot be judged by the normal criteria of truth and falsehood: skilful performance - if it is made beautifully - can be judged more highly than truthfulness alone. In other words, the quality of speech or behaviour is not necessarily to be judged by its veracity.³⁵ This startling method of Zeus' decision makes Hermes and Apollo (and the audience) perceive and approve the worth of skilful intelligence, although manifested in lies and theft. While in the *Odyssey*, for example, the trickery and disguise of Odysseus against Polyphemos end with "the triumph of intelligence over mere physical force",³⁶ Hermes' trickery does not win him victory in this Odyssean sense. Indeed, the conflict is resolved by the unusual means of laughter. The hymn, thus, shows a flexible attitude towards truth, and this attitude makes the "weaker" argument of Hermes "stronger".

As another representation of emotional effect, the hymn gives unique descriptions of the movements of Hermes' eyes.³⁷ The special interest in Hermes' eyes is illustrated at the beginning of the hymn in the compendium of his cult title: he is called "a watcher by night" (*νυκτὸς ὀπωπητῆρ*, 15). This phrase is usually understood as "the watcher for/against theft",³⁸ but may also imply the special power of his eyes: he is defined as the "one who looks", and even "looks at night". In the recapitulation at

the end of the hymn, a parallel power is implied: he is invisibly (or indistinguishably) beguiling (*ἄκριτον ἡπεροπέυει*) throughout the dark night (577-8). The word *ἄκριτον* also has connotations of unpredictability, so Hermes is qualified as “he who can see at night but cannot be seen or caught by others”. Reinforcing this peculiarity of Hermes’ eyes, the hymn gives detailed descriptions of his eyes, especially at critical situations in the development of the narrative.

Along with the simile of the eyes, mentioned before, we have another occurrence when Hermes attempts his deceptive speech to Apollo:

So said Hermes, shooting quick glances from his eyes:
And kept raising his brows and looking this way and that...
(278-9)

This description of his sparkling eyes, incessant movement of his eyebrows and his restless glances is a vivid visualisation of his cunning. Oddly, these restless movements are intended by Hermes to substantiate his innocence, but, in fact, they function as the physical manifestation of his deception. An appropriate analogy might be to the comic theatre, where a comic actor illustrates the amusing gap between his intention of concealing something but his appearance which reveals it. Hermes is cunning, but loveable – loveable because he is, even if unconsciously, revealing his deception as he deceives. So, Apollo addresses him, after this, albeit laughingly, as “beguiler” (*ἡπεροπευτᾶ*, 282).

While making his speeches before Zeus, Hermes shoots sidelong glances (*ἐπιλλίξων*, 387).³⁹ He is probably winking,⁴⁰ and in this instance, his eyes reveal the full expression of his mind: he is sending signals to help Zeus, hinting that actually he did steal Apollo’s cattle. In respect of revealing his theft, his winking has a similar effect to the quick glance that he gave to Apollo. However, the shamelessness is increased here, because the glance given to Apollo is narrated as Hermes’ unconscious representation of his mind, whereas here, before Zeus, Hermes is

intentionally sending the messages both of his guilt and his need for help. By one word, *ἐπιλλίξων*, the cunning and cleverness of Hermes' nature are precisely delineated: he is so clever that he uses every possible means, even his eyes, to gain Zeus' favour. His costume also plays an important role in his claim: "he kept his swaddling clothes upon his arm, and did not cast them away" (388). Hermes knows the effect of the costume, as of a stage prop, which emphasises his neonate status.

The sense of the phrase *πῆρ ἀμαρύσσων* (415) remains uncertain, since there is a lacuna here. Evidently, Hermes desires to hide something (416), but the object is missing from the text. Seeing that the reconciliation of the two gods is suddenly achieved, the concealed object must be of vital importance. Similarly, his sparkling eyes (just before the lacuna) may suggest that some decisively cunning contrivance is to be produced. The same description is used for the eyes of Typhoeus at *Theogony* 827: his "eyes sparkle [or flash] on his hundred heads". Typhoeus' eyes express an overwhelmingly dreadful and dangerous power fighting against Zeus in his last battle for supremacy. So, this unusual expression of Hermes' eyes may imply his threatening rivalry against Apollo even at the moment of their final reconciliation. These representations of Hermes' eyes show that the power of his *metis* can agitate his eyes as well as his mind.

5

The exchange which allows Hermes to be reconciled with Apollo is ambivalent. The exchange is generally regarded as an indicator of social and economic activity; thus Apollo is pleased with the exchange of the lyre for his cattle. However, when Hermes invents the *syrinx*, Apollo, strangely enough, fears that Hermes will steal his lyre and bow (515).⁴¹ As the reason for his fear, Apollo explains that Hermes has *τιμῆ* from Zeus:

Because you have the honour of Zeus to establish deeds of exchange

Among men throughout the fruitful land. (516-7)

This logic would suggest that theft and exchange are one and the same thing, and that the new invention offers the possibility of enormously profitable exchange - that is, theft. Invention usually promotes the progress of civilisation, but, at the same time, it may result in unfair exchange. The nature of exchange - with its positive and negative connotations - thus takes on an ambivalence like that ascribed to the making of the lyre.

Hermes' ambivalence is implicitly and explicitly manifested throughout this hymn. Although Hermes is sometimes called "giver of good things" (*δῶτορ ἑάων*, *Hymn to Hermes* XVIII 12; *Ody.* 8.335),⁴² Maia calls him a great worry (*μεγάλη μέριμνα*, 160), and the hymn concludes that "he profits a little and continuously cheats the race of mortal men" (577). So, too, the world embodied by Hermes is ambivalent: intelligence, invention, exchange, civilisation - all of these have negative sides that undercut their avowedly beneficial aspects.

In the religious context, Hermes is still the object to be worshipped and celebrated in a song of praise: people admire his tricks, albeit warily, hoping that he benefits themselves and beguiles others; his trick is unpredictable - he might transform some disastrous event into an enjoyable one. As the complaint against Zeus is illustrated in Aristophanes' *Ploutos*, people face an unbalanced world where the just suffer poverty. Some people use trickery and theft for unscrupulous profit: as Bowie writes, "a divine trickster is needed to put matters to right."⁴³

The trickery or contrivance is, however, intrinsically bitter. Thus, although the hymn is an amusing piece of work, and "shows a joy in civilisation and inventiveness"⁴⁴ as a whole, there are ominous undercurrents beneath this happy picture, revealed in flashes akin to the dangerous glances of Hermes.

Conclusion

In the *Hymn to Hermes*, Hermes' rivalry towards Apollo and the full presentation of Hermes' nature are essential elements of its construction. The narrative characteristics of this hymn are:

- the illustration of the conflict with Apollo in the form of that between inferior and superior;
- the development of a plausible and satisfying aetiological relationship between narrative and cult, delineating the variety of Hermes' attributes, and most particularly, his elusive and ambivalent personality.

Even in a small detail like that of the baby Hermes' leaping out of his cradle (22), the hymn alludes to Hermes' nature as a god of the exterior, acting mainly outside. On every possible occasion, the hymn illustrates Hermes' divine personality: to be as all-inclusive as possible is one of the distinctive features of this hymn.

In the hymn, the theme – the victory of the inferior over the superior by contrivance – is modified for encomiastic purposes:

- his handicap (being a neonate) is expressed only in his own words, and functions simply as an excuse;
- his contrivance is much emphasised as the manifestation of his *metis*;
- the victory of the inferior over the superior is transformed into their reconciliation, ending with the repeated assertion of brotherly *philia*;
- the theme is saturated with ambivalence: baby as he is, Hermes is not, in fact, inferior to Apollo in contrivance – he appears innocent but he is cunning; he is less powerful but nevertheless surpasses his brother;
- most importantly, “to be the inferior” is one of the important elements of the representation of Hermes: therefore, the speech that manifests Hermes' adversity is a miniaturized reiteration of the theme of this hymn, namely, the victory of the weaker.

The main theme and the theme of the representations of Hermes' nature are thus interrelated, and both resonate with each other, like a contrapuntal melody.

In the *Hymn*, *metis* is valued and two manifestations of *metis* – τέχνη

and *δόλος* - are given positive treatment. The success of the story of the inferior's victory depends on the superb representation of *metis*. Since, in the real world, the triumph of the superior prevails, poets celebrate an occasion where the inferior wins, as a great and memorable achievement. Poets understand that in a competitive situation (which is encountered in much Archaic poetry), it is *metis* that can play a decisive role: imaginative intelligence sometimes does subvert adversity. The laughter of the gods is a mark of appreciation of *metis*; for the gods (and for the audience) the inferior's victory - a sublime *peripeteia* of human destiny - arouses sympathy for the people who have to experience "grievous sufferings" (*κῆδεα στουόεντα*, *Od.* 9.12), and gives delight and hope for their life in this world.

Notes

- 1 "The Second song of Demodokos in the *Odyssey* (8.266-366)", *Studies of Language and Culture*, Foreign Language Institute, Kanazawa University, vol. 2, pp.173-194, 1998.
- 2 Allen and Sikes (1904) 310. Moreover, corruption in this text often makes interpretation difficult.
- 3 Hesiod (fr. 256 M.-W.) and Alkaios (fr. a.2 L.-P.) also deals with Hermes, but no mention of the lyre is found in the extant fragments.
- 4 Apollodoros, by this arrangement, provides Hermes with strings for his lyre. It is uncertain whether Apollodoros used the hymn but changed the story to utilise the cattle for the lyre, or supplemented this account from another (unknown) source. For this discussion, see Allen, Halliday and Sikes (1936) 271-2. In Sophocles, because Zeus' command requires that Hermes be kept concealed within the cave after the theft, Hermes occupies his time in making a mysterious toy.
- 5 The tradition that Apollo invented the lyre is supported by, for example, Pindar, *Pyth.* 5,65; Plato, *Resp.* 399 D-E; Kallimachos, *Hymn to Delos*, 253-4.
- 6 Allen, Halliday and Sikes (1936) *ad loc.*
- 7 The same word is used, for example, for the movement of the horse's feet (*Il.* 19.404); and of a gadfly (*Od.* 22.300).
- 8 Plin. *HN.* 32.14.
- 9 Allen, Halliday and Sikes (1936) *ad loc.*
- 10 Kahn (1978) 178 discusses Hermes' nature of changing location, pointing out that he is always at the border of inside and outside, life and death.

- 11 Shelmerdine (1984) 204 calls this episode the tortoise's "immortal transformation as the lyre".
- 12 ἀναπηλῆσας is uncertain. I take this with Allen, Halliday and Sikes (1936) *ad loc.*
- 13 The same word is used for the cry of Hephaistos when he discovers the adultery of Ares and Aphrodite in the episode (*Ody.* 8.305) discussed in my previous essay (see note 1). In the *Odyssey*, it is also used of the echo in Kirke's house when the companions of Odysseus cry (10.399). In the *Iliad*, σμερδαλέον is used, for example, for the great sound of Zeus' thunderbolt (7.479), and the cry of Nestor to Odysseus (8.92). In the *Ichneutai*, too, the lyre sounds strangely, which surprises Silenos and the satyrs and perhaps it makes them run off (fr. 412, l.199ff.); cf. Pearson (1917) *ad loc.*
- 14 Clay (1989) 98 points out that "Hermes embodies the principle of motion", referring to the folk etymology of deriving Hermes from ὄρμᾶν.
- 15 Apoll. *Arg.* A 1184 mentions the similar primitive method of fire-making. Cf. Plin. *HN.* 16.44.
- 16 Janko (1982) 13 examines the diction and concludes that the date of this hymn is the end of sixth century BC. Clay (1989) 124: "To be sure, Hermes' new method of producing fire presupposes Prometheus' theft".
- 17 Hephaistos, too, is a fire god. Garland (1995) 62 notes the connection between crippled Hephaistos and the nature of fire which "has to be crippled or controlled in order to serve mankind".
- 18 It is suggested that there is a lacuna after this line. Something like the fire-block (to which ἄρμενον, 110, belongs) is needed. See Allen, Halliday and Sikes (1936) *ad loc.*
- 19 Shelmerdine (1984) 205 notes the link between the killing of the tortoise and the sacrifice of the cattle, by pointing out that similar language is used for these two scenes.
- 20 Clay (1989) 117-123 closely examines Hermes' sacrifice. She concludes that Hermes does not perform a sacrifice, but hosts a *dais* for the Olympians; and, that he failed in his attempt because of his "egregious error concerning the nature of his own divinity". Her discussion is interesting, but I disagree on the presupposition of her argument: she thinks that Hermes is in the liminal position between god and man, being uncertain about his divinity until he recognises his inability to partake of *dais*. However, there seems to be no passage that implies the uncertainty about his divinity. As the first few lines of the hymn show (15-6), the deeds to be narrated in this hymn are "famous among the gods". This means that he is on the

- point of being admitted as a member of gods, although still less powerful. Kahn (1978) 172 explains this sacrifice scene as Hermes' double nature: being a god and carrying out sacrifice to the gods.
- 21 The double and circular tracks are themselves deceptive, but they may also allude to the crooked nature of Hermes' talking; cf. Hes. *Op.* 262, "they turn aside (*παρακλίνωσι*) the judgement".
- 22 The text is corrupt here. The MSS. give two finite verbs (*ἔριψεν, διέπλεκε*) without connection. As *ἔριψεν* is difficult to explain, for Hermes is not taking off the sandals off, I take Matthiae's emendation of *ἔραψεν*; cf. Allen, Halliday and Sikes (1936) *ad loc.*
- 23 Mention of swift sandals alludes one of Hermes' attributes, the winged boots, as *βάβδος*" (210) in the words of the old man of Onchestos refers to another.
- 24 J. Chadwick (Extract from *Lexicographica Graeca*, to be soon published, with kind permission of the author) 5.
- 25 For lightness and swiftness, compare *Ate* whose feet are soft, as she does not touch the earth (*Il.* 19. 92-4); and she is swift (*Il.* 9. 505).
- 26 Cf. Griffith (1990) 193 for the agonistic scene, "emphatic departure from common opinion".
- 27 Kahn (1978) 184 notes the duplicity of Hermes especially in the ambiguity of his communications.
- 28 Thalmann (1984) 173: "The adjective (*πολύμητις*) is so memorable that its application to Hermes in the hymn must have evoked Odysseus to the audience and likened the god's cunning to his."
- 29 Sowa (1984) 202 writes that this is "the enforced arbitration", and Hermes is "punished" by taking Zeus' arbitration; however, I think it is Hermes' tactics to bring the problem into the court before Zeus.
- 30 Horace (*Carm.* 1.10.9-12) mentions the laughter of Apollo, not after Hermes' speech, but when Apollo discovers the double theft of Hermes (the cattle and a quiver). Porphyron (*Commentum in Horatium Flacum, ad loc.*) mentions "a hymn to Hermes by the lyric poet Alkaios" - that is, Apollo's laughing response might already have been a familiar motif in Hermes' theft in the time of Alkaios.
- 31 Clay (1989) 134 remarks that Apollo's laughter is provoked by Hermes' restless and sparkling glance, but I think his laughter results from the combination of his speech and behaviour, including his glance.
- 32 The general remark on laughter by Levine (1982) 97 is apt ("Laughter generally implies a real or imagined physical or moral superiority over another person"), but he seems to place too much emphasis on the derisive nature of superior laughter

- (*ibid.* 99) – Apollo’s laughter is not derisive.
- 33 Perhaps partly because Zeus also deceives (*ποικλομήτης Ζεύς*, *h.Ap.* 322). But in *E. I.T.* 1274, Zeus also laughs after the argument between the two gods, Apollo and Gaia, with no connection of deceptiveness. I take the participle *ιδών* (389) to be temporal.
- 34 Griffith (1990) 187–91 gives an interesting discussion on the ambiguous and flexible verdict in the Greek poetic tradition. He also notes the Greek contest system which ranks individuals as “stronger” and “weaker” rather than as “good” and “bad”.
- 35 This idea is familiar to us from the various episodes in the *Odyssey*, and especially concerning robbery, the favourable description of Autolykos (*Od.* 19.395–8) is remarkable.
- 36 Pratt (1993) 58.
- 37 Allen and Sikes (1904) 167 note that the hymn-narrator is especially fond of allusions to quick glances or vibrations of the eyelids.
- 38 Allen, Halliday and Sikes (1936) *ad loc.*
- 39 In *Od.* 18.11, the same word is used of the suitors’ intention of urging Iros to drag Odysseus away.
- 40 Allen, Halliday and Sikes (1936) *ad loc.* suggest that Hermes probably “winks” or “leers” at Zeus to enlist his support.
- 41 The reason why Hermes exchanges specifically with Apollo is that the two gods have many attributes in common. Allen, Halliday and Sikes (1936) 270 comments that “in Greek mythology it is a common explanation that the similarity of attributes is due to an exchange of gifts”. For Hermes’ double theft, see n. 75 above. Schol. A *ad Il.* 15. 256 also mentions Hermes’ double theft.
- 42 His epithet *ἐριοῦνιος* is also usually understood as ‘luck-bringing’, although the etymology and meaning are uncertain.
- 43 Bowie (1993) 283.
- 44 Sowa (1984) 209.

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