

Hermes' Hymns in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*

In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, the newly born Hermes has a busy first day, inventing the lyre and stealing the cattle of Apollo. This theft results in conflict with Apollo and leads to arbitration with Zeus on Olympus. When Zeus rules that Hermes must return the cattle, Apollo re-instigates the conflict between them. Hermes is forced to reveal the lyre which enraptures Apollo. Hermes is able to exchange the lyre for the cattle, Apollo's eternal friendship, and other signs of divinity with which he establishes himself within the divine hierarchy.

I argue that Hermes' actions reflect the development of his understanding of his own status as a god. As this understanding develops, his goal of creating a place for himself within the divine hierarchy crystalizes and he strives to make that goal a reality. Twice during this poem Hermes plays the lyre, which he has invented, and sings a hymn. I believe that these hymns serve as benchmarks which show the extent to which his understanding has developed. These hymns also show his maturing control of the hymnic form which progresses in parallel to his broader understanding of the world.

Hermes sings his first hymn immediately after inventing the lyre and announces that he is the son of Zeus and Maia (57-9). He is aware of the physical context into which he has been born, describing Maia's attendants and the finely wrought objects around him (60-1). Although Hermes initially follows typical hymnic structure with the way that he mentions his divine parentage, he quickly loses focus and does not complete the hymn because, as we find out, he is hungry (62-4). I argue that in this scene Hermes is engaged by physical observations of his environment and motivated by physical hunger. There is no indication that Hermes is motivated by abstract concepts such as *τιμή*. Thus, I do not agree with Clay and Johnston who both argue

that Hermes is asserting his right to *τιμή* by mentioning his divine parentage and the rich possessions of his mother (Clay 1989, 109-110; Johnston 2002, 124). I agree with Johnston that the scope of Hermes' first hymn is limited because he has yet to step beyond the threshold of Maia's house, and it is not until his second hymn that he sings of the entire cosmos because only then has he experienced the wider world (Johnston 2002, 124). However, I maintain that there is no indication that Hermes desires *τιμή* until after he has left Maia's home.

Hermes sings his second hymn when he reveals the lyre to protect himself from Apollo (418-426). In this hymn, Hermes sings of the *μοίραι* that the other gods received after their births, both showing an awareness of divine protocol and asserting that he, as a god, ought to receive a *μοῖρα* of his own (427-8). Hermes follows typical hymnic structure throughout this second hymn, and the poet approves it as *κατὰ κόσμον* (429-33). Therefore, Hermes' understanding of the hymnic form has matured just as his understanding of the divine order has. Although Clay and Vergados note that Hermes is following the structure of a theogony in this hymn, neither of them makes the point that his knowledge of structure has improved since his first hymn (Clay 1989, 138-40; Vergados 2013, 509-13). Thomas does note that this hymn does not end prematurely like the first, but does not connect that improvement to Hermes' broader development (Thomas 2020, 381).

I also disagree with Haft who argues that Hermes, through his cattle-rustling, has already "won" a place among the gods and already possesses the signs of godhood that he will receive later (Haft 1996, 43). I do, however, agree with Johnston's argument that Hermes asserts himself as one of the gods by claiming the gods as his exemplars, but I believe that Hermes is not just asserting his divine status but also his subsequent right to a divine *μοῖρα* (Johnston 2002, 124). In sum, my contribution to the scholarship on the *Hymn to Hermes* is the argument that Hermes'

understanding of the concept of *τιμή* is incremental across the hymn and does not develop until he has rustled the cattle.

Works Cited

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