

A Hunger for Laughter: Hermes' Human Uses of Humor

Throughout this paper I will demonstrate that the uses of humor and references to iambic poetry within the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* are indicative of Hermes' nature as a transgressor and intermediary between the mortal and the divine, as well as indicative of his nature as a being of mixed mortal and divine status (Strauss Clay, 1989). This paper builds upon the works of Strauss Clay, Bungard, Versnel, and psychological studies of humor to better understand and exemplify Hermes' humanity that lies within his desire to make others (especially the gods) laugh and his specific utilizations of humor. Contrasted with examples of divine humor in other Homeric works like *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Hermes' uses are strikingly non-superior as he employs humor as an apotropaic defense mechanism and a tool of communication, pointing towards Hermes being more human than he is initially understood to be within the context of this hymn. While all gods can laugh and make merry (it is even considered bad if they cannot, as is the case of Demeter in lines 200-205 of *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*), none do so the same way that Hermes does: by actively engaging in iambic poetry (Vergados, 2011) and freely associating himself with the "underdog" position, he more closely resembles humanity than divinity (Versnel, 2011). While his engagement in iambic poetry within the hymn itself is only oblique, there is reference to this more informal, mocking style of poetry in his hymn to himself in lines 55-60 of *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, and his connections with iambic poetry in general ought not to be ignored, but rather explored. His employment of both the communicative and defensive natures of laughter further associates him with his *timē* as a god of transitions, with communication being the verbal crossing of boundaries and apotropaic magic being the defending of them. Thus his specific uses exemplify his liminal nature as a

semi-divine individual, neither fully on one side of the boundary nor the other, but ever in between (Bungard, 2011).

Not only will this paper investigate the psychological desire for comedy that is inherent in humanity and its contrast with haughty, divine humor, but it will also consider Hermes' representation in Sophocles' *The Searchers* and the nature of comedies as a social context for the crossing of boundaries being found within Hermes' *timē*. Closer to the conclusion, this presentation will also consider a third potential use of humor from Hermes as a coping mechanism to deal with his aforementioned semi-divine status and the stresses that are associated with it: namely a crisis of identity and a craving for meat which is markedly non-divine. This third potential use of humor adds yet another element of humanity expressed by Hermes in his Homeric hymn, developing the concept that the hymn is indicative of the humanity he holds alongside his divinity.

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