

Barren Women and Helpless Babies: Deceptive Bodies of the Gods

The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* portray the gods Hermes and Demeter appearing in human bodies which are both deceptive and inferior. The *Homeric Hymns* serve as one of the major sources for our understanding of the Greek pantheon. Clay (1989) has argued that a major purpose of the *Homeric Hymns* was to portray each god's shifting relationship to other gods and to humans. This paper, however, will look at the basis of that relationship in the *Hymns*—the physical interactions between gods and humans when the gods take on human bodies. I will argue that the gods create misunderstanding by appearing in deceptive and inferior bodies.

I will discuss two examples from the *Homeric Hymns*. First, I will briefly examine the scene in the *Homer Hymn to Demeter* in which Metaneira interrupts Demeter placing her son in the fire. Specifically, I will examine how each body in this scene is an inversion of its perceived form. Demeter, who is in fact ageless and a goddess of fertility, is perceived as old and barren. Demophoon, who has a mortal and vulnerable body, is, for the time he is under Demeter's care, invulnerable and on his way to immortality. Metaneira's assumptions about the body, both the body of Demeter and the body of Demophoon, create the break in understanding which leads to Demeter removing herself from the mortal world.

Second, I will examine the interactions between Hermes and Apollo in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. The focus of this paper will be how the *Hymn to Hermes* plays with the idea of misunderstandings based upon the perceived body. The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* has been recently examined in terms of its performative context by Johnston (2002), who addressed earlier concerns (Allen, Halliday, and Sikes 1936) about the cohesion of the text by placing the *Hymn* within the context of cult practice, specifically as related to athletic contests. None of the scholarship however has looked closely at the way in which the gods' physical bodies are portrayed.

Hermes, as the ultimate trickster, utilizes the concept of a god 'stuck' in a human body to create a smokescreen for his actions. Hermes claims that he has no interest in cattle rustling, but only in his sleeping, his mother's milk, having wrappings around his shoulders and warm baths. Hermes' defense is an appeal to the physical needs of a human body - food, shelter, and nurturing. Likewise, later in the same speech Hermes makes a direct reference to his own physical body, saying that his feet are tender and the ground is rough. Hermes implies that if he had, as Apollo claims, stolen the cattle he must logically have walked there as a human would (HHH 260-273). The logic of Hermes' claims about his body fails when one steps back from the text and remembers that a god is in no way limited by the forms he assumes. However, within the *Hymn to Hermes*, three gods, Hermes, Apollo and Zeus all maintain the pretense that Hermes' claims to an infant's body are in some way valid.

The misunderstanding that results from the gods' assumption of deceptive bodies in the *Hymn to Demeter* and the *Hymn to Hermes* illustrates the larger problem of gods' bodies and how they appear to humans. The appearance of Demeter and Hermes in inferior bodies—an old woman and a baby—reveals the depth of the deception created by the gods' assumed forms and the source of mortal ignorance and misunderstanding so prevalent in myth.

Bibliography

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