

## The Milk of (Im)mortality: Images of Breastfeeding in the *Homeric Hymns*

The *Homeric Hymns* generally represent the births of gods and narrate how they come to possess their individual powers and privileges. Scholars of the *Homeric Hymns* have discussed several representations of divinities, along with their familial connections and interactions. However, few have focused on the concept of breastfeeding, or the very absence of description of divinities breast feeding, which occurs in several *Hymns*, particularly those to Apollo, Hermes, and Demeter. The lack of breastfeeding in the *Hymns* contributes to the image of the divine beings themselves, as exhibited by the fact that immortals are rarely ever breastfed. I will take several examples from the *Homeric Hymns* and focus on the significant references to divine beings who specifically do not feed from their mothers' breasts. In these *Hymns*, as I will argue, breastfeeding is represented as a detrimental act, one that can also be interpreted as a manifestation of mortality.

Along with the *Homeric Hymns*, I will use Homer's *Iliad* to support the notion of breastfeeding as a source and cause of mortality, concentrating on the heroic figure of Hector and his mother, Hekabe. As in the three *Homeric Hymns* to be examined, Homer displays a similar motif in his epic poem: the act of breastfeeding is frequently regarded as a mortal act, and thus not usually practiced by the gods. Margo Kitts (1994) argues: "Those who are breastfed are born to die and stand at a lower level of being than do mortal children of gods or immortal gods" (142). I will add to Kitts' argument with my own interpretation of these texts, by examining Homer's Hector in the *Iliad* and the several references made toward his diet of breast milk as an infant. This will be coupled with an analysis of references in the *Homeric Hymns* to Demeter, Apollo, and Hermes and the specific absence of breastfeeding. Differences in the diets between gods and humans can be interpreted in many different ways, but Homer repeatedly shows that

breastfeeding is not commonly practiced among divine beings and is strictly a characteristic of mortals and the animalistic appetites they possess.

I aim to illuminate the representation of breastfeeding in these works as a process that renders men mortal (cf. Murnaghan 1992), and one that at the same time emphasizes the image of the gods as divine beings who do not engage in this act of motherly nourishment.

### Bibliography

Kitts, Margo. (1994). "Two Expressions for Human Mortality in the Epics of Homer." *History of Religions* 34.2: 132-151.

Murnaghan, Sheila. (1992). "Maternity and Mortality in Homeric Poetry." *Classical Antiquity* 11.2: 242-264.