

Son of Maia, son of Zeus: Shifting patronymics in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*

If, as Clay (1989; 2001) suggests, the major *Homeric Hymns* reflect the establishment of the *timai* of their central figures, it is reasonable to expect that patronymics should play a significant role in the narratives, inasmuch as these particular epithets describe the gods in terms of their familial relationships and thus help situate them in the power structures of Olympus (For opposition to Clay's views, see Currie 2011). Accordingly, we find that the patronymics in the hymn to Demeter underscore separation from her family, especially her siblings; Apollo's patronymics emphasize his role as Zeus' preeminent son; and the handful of patronymics that describe Aphrodite remind us that Zeus is bringing that goddess firmly under his paternal control.

The situation in the *Hymn to Hermes* is somewhat different. Unlike Demeter, Aphrodite, or even Apollo (who, moments after his birth, becomes a young adult), the newborn Hermes remains, at best, a toddler for the entire hymn, and his story is not just about how he fits into the Olympian hierarchy but, equally importantly, about his discovery that he is indeed part of it (Purves 2011). His patronymics shift throughout the hymn as his identity evolves.

The hymn can be loosely divided into five sections; the first (1-98), on the invention of the lyre and the theft of Apollo's cattle, includes four patronymics: Hermes is, appropriately, "son of Zeus and Maia" at the beginning of the hymn, "son of Zeus" once, and "son of Maia" twice. The last best reflects his initial identity: until his status as an Olympian is established, he is not securely a "son of Zeus."

The next section (99-232) centers on Hermes' cattle sacrifice and attempt to eat some of the cooked meat—confirming his identity as a god (Clay 1989, 122). In this section, the only

patronymics found for Hermes are variations on “son of Zeus.” Apollo is referred to as either “son of Zeus” or “son of Leto,” but the latter only occurs in Hermes’ speech to Maia: Hermes need not identify Apollo as an Olympian but instead differentiates his half-brother from himself.

The third section (233-321) is about the conflict between Hermes and Apollo. The patronymics of the two gods reflect their equal standing but at the same time distinguish them: Hermes is “son of Zeus and Maia,” while Apollo is “son of Zeus and Leto.” There are a few references to “son of Leto” (one of these, again, in the words of Hermes), but neither god is simply referred to as the “son of Zeus.”

The fourth section (322-97) continues the conflict between the brothers, this time in the presence of Zeus. Now that identities are certain, they need only one patronymic: “the beautiful children of Zeus” bookends this section.

That shared patronymic also occurs once in the last section of the poem (398-580), about the reconciliation and friendship of the brothers and their return to Olympus. The majority of the patronymics in this section are variants on “son of Maia” and “son of Leto,” perhaps because among the younger Olympians, the epithet “son of Zeus” applies to too many individuals. (Some of the few occurrences of “son of Zeus” in this section, like the one found in the first section, seem to be connected to references to the lyre; another seems to reflect Hermes’ recognition of Apollo’s status as the preeminent son of Zeus.)

The various patronymics of Hermes thus reflect his evolving identity and his position in the hierarchy of Olympus. At the beginning of the story, Hermes’ position is not yet secure, and so he is the son of Maia; but to acknowledge himself as a god is to acknowledge that he is son of Zeus. The conflict with Apollo is marked by double patronymics, reflecting the brothers’ equality as sons of Zeus while simultaneously differentiating them, a fact their reconciliation

reinforces: they are the son of Maia and the son of Leto, not because their positions are insecure (as Hermes' is in the first section), but precisely because they are secure. Hermes no longer needs to assert his identity as a son of Zeus. That can now be taken for granted.

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