

“I Cannot Tell a Lie”: Hermes’ Dishonest Truth

Early Greek epic has a complicated relationship with truth. Hesiod’s Muses famously know many lies that are like truths, and Odysseus is equally well-known for half-truths; but the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* also contains an unusually large number of truth-claims, especially in the defense speech of the young trickster. At lines 368-9 of the *Hymn*, Hermes begins his speech by saying “Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἦ τοι ἐγὼ σοι ἀληθείην καταλέξω· / νημερτής τε γάρ εἰμι καὶ οὐκ οἶδα ψεύδεσθαι (Father Zeus, of course I’ll tell you the truth, since I am truthful and don’t know how to lie).” He then proceeds, however, to lie, stating at lines 379-80, “ὥς οὐκ οἶκαδ’ ἔλασσα βόας, ὥς ὄλβιος εἶην, / οὐδ’ ὑπὲρ οὐδὸν ἔβην· τὸ δέ τ’ ἀτρεκέως ἀγορεύω ([Believe me] that I didn’t drive the cows home—may I be blessed!—and I didn’t even cross the threshold; I’m saying this accurately).”

Considered purely on its own merits, this speech does not immediately strike the modern reader as problematic. The entire hymn to this point has characterized Hermes as an infant trickster; it stands to reason that he would continue to deny his behavior. But the vocabulary that Hermes chooses to describe himself and his speech is surprising. The word ἀληθείη is not used of divine speech anywhere else in Homer or Hesiod, and only once elsewhere in the Hymns. Moreover, nowhere else in that corpus does a speaker claim that he will tell the truth using the word ἀληθείη and then tell a story as evasive and disingenuous as Hermes’, a fact which has not been observed by scholars before.

Previous scholarship (Clay 1989, followed by Callaway 1993 and Fletcher 2008) has argued, in the context of discussing Hermes’ oaths or almost-oaths, that he does not perjure himself in this passage: since he slipped through the keyhole, he did not really cross the threshold, and “he never drove the cows through the door” (Clay 1989, 134). Heiden 2010

agrees, characterizing Hermes' words as "factually incomplete and diverting rather than false." But these scholars are concerned with whether or not Hermes perjures himself under oath and not with whether he misrepresents the truth of his story. But Cole 1983, in an analysis of the vocabulary of truth in archaic poetry, characterizes ἀληθείη as marked by "completeness, non-omission of any relevant particular, whether through forgetting or ignoring," and it is precisely this quality which Hermes' slippery words do not exhibit.

The fact that ἀληθείη always indicates truthful speech elsewhere in early hexameter poetry and yet appears markedly out of its usual context here would surprise, perhaps even shock, an audience familiar with such poetry. Moreover, Hermes keeps insisting on the truth of his speech with vocabulary which is, unlike ἀληθείη, used by divinities, such as νημερτής and ἀτρεκέως; but of course these only serve to make the untruth of his words still more obvious, to the poem's external audience as well as to Zeus and Apollo.

The other odd thing about Hermes' emphatic claim to truth is that he is arguing against Apollo, the god most associated with truth and honest responses. In fact, just a few lines earlier in the hymn (315), Apollo is described (if one accepts Wolf's emendation) as νημερτέα φωνῶν, speaking truly. This is an isolated instance, however; elsewhere in the hymn, the vocabulary of truth is associated with Hermes, not with Apollo, which would seem incongruous to an audience accustomed to hearing precisely the opposite about these two gods.

This paper first argues that the anomalous uses of the language of truth in the *Hymn to Hermes* are significant and would have appeared so to the poem's original audience(s). It then suggests that these misuses of the words are fitting for a hymn dedicated to a trickster deity and enhance the poem's oft-noted humor. Furthermore, the fact that the language of truth is mainly associated with Hermes and not with Apollo emphasizes both the initial conflict between the two

brothers and their eventual reconciliation, with the transfer of oracular power from Apollo to Hermes: although Hermes never precisely becomes honest himself, he does get oracular bees to speak the truth for him (προφρονέως ἐθέλουσιν ἀληθείην ἀγορεύειν, l. 561). Hermes remains ambiguous in his relationship to the vocabulary of truth, but at least he is honestly dishonest.

Bibliography

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