

Between Truth and Lies: A Metaliterary Reading of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*

Although Hermes' lies in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* have been widely discussed by the scholarship, an interpretation of them within the contemporary debate about the nature of Archaic poetry and its relationship with truth, lies and literary fiction is currently missing.

In this paper, I propose a metaliterary reading of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, considering it as a song about songs and their nature, that can therefore suggest a precise view of archaic poetry. I argue that, while there are many elements that contribute to shape a traditional vision of poetry as carrier and vehicle of truth, the ability of the newborn god to manipulate language and the positive way in which his lies are recognized by the other gods can suggest a new perception of poetry, where lies (and literary fiction) are welcomed and appreciated.

First of all, I analyze those features of the text that support a metaliterary reading. Not only Hermes is the god of language and poetry, but he is portrayed as “creator, manipulator, and interpreter of signs” (Vergados 2013). The ambiguity of language and the ability to manipulate it become therefore the core of the narration. Moreover, the hymn can be easily conceived of as an example of *myse en abyme* or *mirror text*, as the two Hermes' songs mirror the whole hymn in which they are featured: poetry becomes therefore the principal subject of poetry itself.

I proceed then to analyze the view of poetry conveyed by the hymn. There are several elements that hint at a traditional conception of poetry: the poetic text is an expression of truth, and its truthfulness is guaranteed by the divine testimony. The first element is the invocation to the Muse (1), usually connected in Archaic poetry with a claim of truthfulness. Even more relevant is the invocation provided in Hermes' second song (429-430), addressed not to the Muses, but to Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses and personification of memory: it emphasizes therefore the historical (and truthful) nature of the song. This claim for authority

and truthfulness is supported by the strong parallelism between poetic art and prophecy: the verb ἐρεεῖνω/ἐξερεεῖνω is used to indicate the act of “interrogating” the lyre (482-483) in order to receive its music, as well as the act of “interrogating” Apollo’s oracle (545) and the maiden bees (564) in order to receive a prophecy, suggesting therefore an interpretation of poetry as a divine (and authoritative) source of knowledge.

If all these elements point towards a traditional concept of poetry, in which the poet is a *maître de vérité* and his role is to preserve the collective memory of the past (Detienne 1973), in this case the poet himself, Hermes, god of language, poetry, and deception, does not really fit this role. There are indeed some other elements that can suggest a different view of poetry, in which lies are admitted and maybe even enjoyed. I analyze therefore the words connected with the whole semantic range of pleasure and joy, linked in two cases with the lyre and its sound (28-32, 504-506) and in two other cases with the lies pronounced by the god (281-282, 389-390): both poetry and lies provide pleasure and excite the same feeling of joy, expressed by the same verb γελάω. Hermes’ lies have been long associated with Odysseus’ lies (Pratt, 1993; Shelmerdine, 1981), but no one has really noticed that the nature and reception of these lies seem to be completely different: while Odysseus’ lies are usually believed as truth, and this is fundamental for his plans in order to be fulfilled, Hermes uses his lies not to deceive, but to charm, to amuse: both Apollo and Zeus laugh after hearing Hermes’ lies, because they are not deceived, but they are able to appreciate Hermes’ ability to use words in a skillful way, ἐπισταμένως (390): Hermes’ lies are recognized as lies and appreciated for their cunning. The author of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* is therefore proposing a new concept of lies, whose aim is not to deceive but to amuse, as a literary tool that the poet can use, and a new concept of literature, less connected to the truthful word pronounced by the divinity and more open to personal creativity and invention.

Bibliography

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