

Exclusion Among the Olympians

While the Homeric Hymns may have been written at different times and by different authors, scholars such as Jenny Strauss Clay (1989) have detailed connections between the major hymns which serve to unite them as a cohesive unit. This paper will build on these observations by delineating a series of structural similarities between the Hymns to Apollo, Hermes, and Demeter. Specifically, the paper will examine the trope of exclusion in each of the three hymns, showing how this plot device works in all three as a narrative feature to build tension as well as to demarcate relationships between the major gods and goddesses, and ultimately between the hymns themselves.

The Hymns to Apollo, Hermes, and Demeter all involve a critical moment in which the title deity is excluded from the Olympian circle. In the Hymn to Apollo, this moment comes at the very beginning, when Apollo first comes to Olympus. When the other gods perceive him as a danger, his mother disarms him and brings him to Zeus, thus quickly ending his social exclusion. In the Hymn to Hermes, the story likewise begins with the exclusion of the title god, but in this case Hermes must use all of his cunning to induce his brother Apollo to lead him into the presence of Zeus and thus induct him into the Olympian community. In the Hymn to Demeter, unlike the previous two hymns, the deity is not in fact excluded as the hymn opens, and she is the one who excludes herself as the hymn goes on in order to accomplish a specific purpose. Also in contrast, others specifically woo her to return.

Despite the differences between the circumstances of exclusion in these three hymns, a number of structural parallels can be drawn. First, the circumstances of exclusion, revolving as they do around the title deity of the hymn, suggest potentially grave danger for the Olympian

order if the deity is not successfully integrated (or re-integrated) into the order. Apollo enters Olympus as an armed threat; Hermes promises to become a prince of thieves; and Demeter threatens to wipe out humanity if she does not get her way. Second, all of them are brought into the order with the help of a mediator: in Apollo's case it is his mother Leto, in Hermes' case it is his brother Apollo, and in Demeter's case it is her mother Rhea. Third, all of them must deal with Zeus, the ultimate judge and arbiter, in order to get what they want and be inducted or re-inducted into the order. Although the general circumstances change, this structural narrative remains largely the same.

Examining the use of the theme of exclusion in these hymns also seems to provide a kind of story arc from hymn to hymn. Assuming that Apollo's hymn is chronologically first and Demeter's is last among these three hymns, we can see a development in the nature and severity of the threats facing the Olympian order. In the Hymn to Apollo, the implied threat is to the gods and to the rule of Zeus, but the threat is quickly defused with little action needed by Zeus. In the Hymn to Hermes, the threat is both to gods and mortals, but the threat essentially resolves itself when Hermes connives his way into an audience with Zeus. However, in the Hymn to Demeter, the threat is primarily to mortals, and it takes decisive and careful action on the part of Zeus to resolve the crisis. We can observe that as the greater story arc goes on, the reign of Zeus appears to become more secure, while the status of mortals becomes more precarious. In the meantime, Zeus is challenged with increasingly difficult situations, thus suggesting that he is undergoing an education of sorts on how to wisely govern the cosmos and the other powerful beings that live in it.

Bibliography

Clay, Jenny Strauss. *The Politics of Olympus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.