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ASPECTS OF MYTH IN THE *HOMERIC HYMN TO HERMES*

ABSTRACT. Jarczyk Magdalena, Aspects of Myth in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*.

The article explores the narrative recounted in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* for its aetiological and educational content and message. In particular, it discusses the creation of the lyre, the role of music in paideia and a less explored view of the protagonist's cattle raid as it relates to war, sports and the education of youth. It then explores the religious context and specific meaning of Hermes slaughtering two of the stolen cows by contrasting his actions with those of Prometheus.

Keywords: *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*; myth; lyre; education; cattle raiding; ritual; sacrifice; food offering.

INTRODUCTION

*Great Mercury, by Maia sprung
From Atlas; god of nimble tongue
And understanding; saviour
Of our new race, who deigned to teach
Man wrestling, grace of body, speech
And civilised behaviour*

The purpose of this paper¹ is to put forward an interpretation of a number of aspects of the myth told in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*; an interpretation focused on those motifs in the poem whose role is, in one way or another, didactic. It was written with the conviction that the *Hymn* is a significant and

¹This paper was originally my diploma (licentiate) dissertation written in 2006 under the supervision of dr Magdalena Stulgrosz and submitted in the Institute of Classical Philology of Adam Mickiewicz University. This is a modified version. While translating it into English I ran into one massive difficulty in that I was not able to obtain again many of the articles and books I used back then. As a result all references are to the versions I used back then even if they happen to be Polish translations of standard works which exist in English, such as those by Walter Burkert, Martin L. West or even Werner Jaeger. All those are marked in the Bibliography (with a “(+)”) and their English or original titles listed. Additionally, a number of quotations have unfortunately gone from various languages (such as Spanish or French) into English via Polish, or even from English back into English via Polish. I regret that circumstances have not allowed me to now retrace the steps of this research in more detail, and hope it retains enough of its validity to be read even so.

interesting work, possibly a little neglected,² and worthy of a detailed analysis: certainly more detailed and especially more holistic than what I am able to offer here.

Homer and Hesiod, the authors of the first works of Archaic epic poetry to be written down, emerge from the mists of prehistory like some monumental Pillars of Hercules: nothing precedes them, and what follows is Greek literature as we know it. Thus their poems overshadow with their greatness all other early epics, including the hymns called Homeric, long seen as derivative in comparison³ and so less valuable.

Contrary to that opinion, the longer *Homeric Hymns* are not only possessed of great charm and wit; they are also serious theological works, irreplaceable when investigating Archaic Greek religion. A number of scholars⁴ find the *Hymn to Hermes* to be the most difficult among them, implying it is the one we understand the least and ought to research with particular attention, and it is such research that I attempt to contribute to here at least in some small measure.

Jenny Strauss Clay, the author of perhaps the most important work written on the larger *Homeric Hymns* in the late 20th century, believed it a mistake to try and analyze them only in the context of heroic epic poetry. Thus not only would she place them side by side with the *Theogony*, but also argue for the longer Homeric hymns to be seen as a separate and specific genre, one which might actually require us to recognize hymnic epic poems as distinct from heroic and theogonic ones.⁵ Without debating her view here, I want to suggest another and somewhat similar solution: that we see the *Hymn to Hermes* as a primarily *didactic* epic poem.

The theological function of the *Hymns* (including the *Hymn to Hermes*) proposed by Clay is in itself didactic in the sense of spreading a unifying ideology. The subject was discussed by her in such detail (for all the major hymns)⁶ that it is only one aspect that I elaborate upon in here, namely the aetiology of sacrifice. However, our understanding of the *Hymn to Hermes* as a didactic work has been

²Cf. Clay 1989, 3.

³Clay 1997, 498–499; Janko 1982, 12.

⁴Johnston 2002, 109; Clay 1989, 144. Janko (1989, 2) also points out that the text of this “difficult” hymn is more damaged than that of the others. West (*Homeric Hymns...* 2003, 12) expresses a similar idea in a totally negative way, suggesting that the *Hymn to Hermes* stands out among the other *Homeric Hymns* in a number of ways, one of which is that “its language is the least traditional, containing numerous words and expressions which are late, ill-considered or imprecise; it is also the least skilfully structured of the hymns, with many inconsistencies and redundancies in the narrative, whose poet does not master the even tempo proper for an epic tale.” Needless to say I find his evaluation overly severe.

⁵Clay 1989: 267–270; Clay 1997, 492 and 496.

⁶Her book *The Politics of Olympus. Form and Meaning in the Major Homeric Hymns* (Clay 1989) is in fact all about it.

greatly expanded by discovering in it a rich pedagogical message directed at adolescent youth.⁷ In the paper I highlight that aspect of the poem by combining Johnston's results with a few observations of my own regarding the didactic and pedagogical import of the lyre, whose invention features largely in the story told in the *Hymn*.

In this discussion of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* I have used several editions: Allen, Halliday and Sikes' classic one, as well as Càssola's more recent one and the even later editions of West and Richardson.⁸

1. HERMES' INVENTION

*You are the one my poem sings—
The lyre's inventor; he who brings
Heaven's messages; the witty
Adventurer who takes delight
In slyly stowing out of sight
Anything he finds pretty.*

In this section I take a closer look at the instrument invented by Hermes, its position among other Greek string instruments, and the related nomenclature,⁹ to then consider its role in the myth. I also intend to briefly consider one of the instruments' epithets, which I believe to refer to one manner of playing it.

Let us begin with the text (v. 41–51):

Then [Hermes] cut off its limbs¹⁰ and scooped out the marrow of the mountain-tortoise with a scoop of grey iron. [...] He cut stalks of reed to measure and fixed them, fastening their ends across the back and through the shell¹¹ of the tortoise, and then stretched ox hide all over it by

⁷ Johnston 2002.

⁸ *Homeric Hymns*. Ed. by T. W. Allen, W. R. Halliday and E. E. Sikes. 1936; *Inni omerici*. Ed. by F. Càssola. 1992; *Homeric Hymns, Homeric Apocrypha, Lives of Homer*. Ed. by M. L. West. 2003; *Three Homeric Hymns: to Apollo, Hermes and Aphrodite: Hymns 3, 4 and 5*. Ed. by N. Richardson. 2010.

⁹ Maas and Snyder (1989, 1–2 and *passim*) divide all Ancient Greek string instruments into three groups: harps (with strings of clearly differing lengths), lutes (with strings all of approximately equal length, stretched along a neck), and “lyres” (with strings all of approximately equal length, stretched between a crossbar and a stand), with the third group including the phorminx, the cithara (or, box lyre), the lyre proper and the barbiton. In order to avoid misunderstandings, I shall only use the word *lyre* on its own to refer to the lyre proper, using the terms *lyre group* or *lyre family* to mean the four instruments collectively.

¹⁰ ἀναπηρώσας. The reading is uncertain, with Allen, Halliday and Sikes's (*Homeric Hymns* 1936, 283–284) ἀναπηλήσας as another possibility.

¹¹ διὰ νῶτα διὰ ῥινοῖτο χελώνης. This place, too, has seen many attempts at emendation; a few can be found in *Homeric Hymns* (1936, 287; all rejected). West (*Homeric Hymns...* 2003, 116) has λιθορῥινοῖτο.

his skill. Also he put in the horns and fitted a cross-piece upon the two of them, and stretched seven strings of sheep-gut...

Already this short excerpt is quite puzzling. To list but two examples of unanswered questions: why exactly are the strings termed *consonant* (*σύμφωνοι*, an epithet missing from the above translation)?¹² And what purpose exactly was served by the reeds?¹³ Still, one thing is clear from the above description: the author means a string instrument with its sound box made of the shell of a tortoise, that is, a lyre.¹⁴

Yet he only calls Hermes' toy *λύρα* once (in v. 423), and even there the full phrase is *λύρη κιθαρίζειν*. Other terms for the instrument include *φόρμιγξ* (v. 64 and 506), *χέλως* (v. 153 and 242), and *ἄθυρμα* (v. 52), with the remaining occurrences of *έλως* and *ἄθυρμα* referring either to the tortoise or its shell before the creature died and par force became a musical instrument. The only verbs used to indicate playing that lyre are *κιθαρίζειν* (v. 423, 425, 433, 455, 475, 476, and 510) and its prefixed form *ἐγκιθαρίζειν* (v. 17). Why such wealth and, undeniably, such inconsistency to the terminology?

Χέλως (*tortoise*) is an unambiguous synonym for the lyre, but *κίθαρις* at first brings to mind the somewhat different instrument that is the cithara. Still, *φόρμιγξ* and *κίθαρις* are the only words for string instruments to be found in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Homer uses them interchangeably and is extremely unlikely to mean either the tortoise lyre, or the true cithara, since both those instruments only appear in Greece around 700 BC.¹⁵ And that is only the beginning of nomenclature issues; according to M. West,¹⁶ poets will use *φόρμιγξ*, *κίθαρις*, and *λύρα* interchangeably until the 4th century BC if not later.

Thus while in discussing the lyre, the cithara, and other instruments today, we use names derived from ancient literature, we must not take the poets too literally on that score, or terminological chaos will result. An independent source of information is needed, and can be found in iconography.

¹²Discussed in detail by M. Kaimio (1974, 30–31).

¹³A short overview of the possible applications for the reed stalks proposed by scholars is to be found in Hägg (1989: 37).

¹⁴Hägg (1989: 44–48) recounts in summary another version of the myth, where Hermes makes an instrument out of the shell of a tortoise. The direct source is a Persian novel preserved in fragments only, clearly based on the Greek novel *Metiochus and Parthenope*, of which we also have a fragment. Since the Persian author calls the instrument *barbat* (*lyre* or *harp*), the Greek author most likely wrote *βάρβιτον* or *βάρβιτος*, but in Hägg's opinion the word was probably used as a synonym for *λύρα* and should not be taken to indicate an actual barbiton (which differs from the lyre in the length and shape of its arms and a lower pitch). In Sophocles' *Ichneutae* Hermes' instrument is called *λύρα*.

¹⁵Maas and Snyder 1989, 14.

¹⁶West 2003, 65–66.

1.1. THE PHORMINX, THE CITHARA AND THE LYRE

String instruments of the lyre family feature in Greek art from the earliest times on; if we include Cretan images, then the oldest illustration is the Hagia Triada sarcophagus fresco, dated to the 14th century BCE. The instrument depicted in that painting (which shows a procession, perhaps a funeral procession) has a fairly small, crescent-shaped soundbox, not much thicker than the arms, which go out of it directly and seem to be made of the same material as the soundbox,¹⁷ and so, I suppose, of wood. String instruments of similar construction (with a rounded base and arms extended directly from the corpus, usually straight and parallel), are also featured in Mycenaean, Geometric, Archaic and Classical art. Since until the late 8th century BCE it is the only Greek string instrument attested in archaeological excavations (discounting the Cycladic harps), M. Maas and J. M. Snyder identify it with Homer's phorminx. After all, the poet does call it *γλαφυρή* (either *hollow* or *rounded*) and introduces it in contexts which resemble the relevant scenes depicted on vases (including during a feast, a music competition, a wedding procession, and, of course, a group dance¹⁸).

The cithara proper differs from the phorminx mostly by its flat base and much larger size, and its arms tend to be much more elaborate. Other than that, vase paintings imply it may have been a much more richly decorated, more expensive instrument, but before we jump to conclusions, such an impression might be caused by the fact that images of the cithara are for the most part later than those of the phorminx. Instruments can be found in iconography as well which combine the features of the phorminx (such as a rounded base) and the cithara (twisted arms with pegs on top, and sometimes an additional crossbar acting as a bridge). Perhaps for such "cross-breeds" one could keep the term "cradle cithara", sometimes applied also to the earlier and simpler instruments, which I here refer to as the phorminx, following Mass and Snyder.

Beside form, instruments of the lyre family differ clearly in use. The cithara (before 700 BCE, the phorminx) accompanies solely ceremonial events, often of religious nature. It is played by professional citharists, and first of all by Apollo, for whom it is alongside the bow a fundamental attribute, a hallmark even.¹⁹ The lyre on the other hand is altogether less formal, less professional and more

¹⁷Maas and Snyder 1989, 2–3. In the same work (p. 16) there is a reproduction of that painting.

¹⁸E.g. *Od.* 1.154; 8.248–380; 23.133–147. Cf. also *H. Hom. Ap.* 514–519. Allen, Halliday and Sikes (*Homeric Hymns* 1936, 286) focus on the textual evidence in Homer and conclude that nothing can be said for certain about the construction of the phorminx. Thus Maas and Snyder put together an instrument with no name and a name with no instrument, convinced that while Homer's setting may contain elements taken from more than one period, they cannot be later than ca. 700 BCE.

¹⁹More on the subject below in this section, in 1.2.

human. Its primary contexts (especially but not only in Classical painting) are the symposium and the school.²⁰

As mentioned above, both the lyre and the cithara appear to be innovations of a sort in Greek culture. They enter it at roughly the same time and take an important place next to the simpler phorminx to then supersede it gradually. However, while the lyre may well be a thoroughly novel invention (whether originally Greek or borrowed from further east, is difficult to say), the cithara seems to be directly derived from the phorminx, even though it exceeds it by far in size and complexity. Not only do we see it in similar situations in art and literature; its is also built according to the same principles as the phorminx or *citharis*, that is, it has a wooden box extending directly into arms. Still, wherever the distinction between the phorminx and the cithara comes into play, I believe we must consider the word *κίθαρις* a term for the former, since it is found in Homer.

Apparently the distinction was not always important. Maas and Snyder²¹ believe that as many as two hundred years may have passed from the appearance of the cithara in art to the moment the word *κithára* entered Greek for good, replacing the earlier terminology for the same instrument. In their opinion those earlier terms are precisely *κίθαρις* and *φόρμιγξ*, which therefore throughout the Archaic Period could have meant both the large concert instrument of the professional as the plain household phorminx. Thus I expect there must have been such transitory periods (and such transitional forms of the instruments, rarely confirmed in art but still present) where the distinction was blurred. That was all easier with the verb *κίθαρίζειν* used indifferently with all the lyre-like instruments. And then there is another trace of that fluid transformation of the phorminx into the cithara, and now I would like to introduce it and demonstrate how it relates to the *Hymn to Hermes*.

1.2 THE GIFT

Musical instruments play an important role in myth and cult alike. As the syrinx was associated with Pan, and the tympanum with Magna Mater, so was it obvious to Classical era (and later) Greeks that the cithara belongs to Apollo. But of course in Homer the god's instrument is called *φόρμιγξ*.²² And then in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (v. 131) the newborn son of Leto claims for himself: εἴη μοι κίθαρις τε φίλη καὶ καμπύλα τόξα (“the lyre and the curved bow ever dear to [him]”).

²⁰ More on the typical contexts in which the lyre can be found in section 2.

²¹ Maas and Snyder 1989, 31.

²² E.g. *Il.* 1.603 or 24.63.

In art, too, we see that god, if not with the cithara, then with the phorminx. Hermes is not a god of music though. It is only in the *Hymn to Hermes* (and other renderings of the same myth, such as the *Ichneutae*) that that aspect of his nature is revealed: here, the son of Zeus and Maia invents not just the lyre, but also the syrinx, not to mention being able to impress Apollo with both instrumental music and song. And while the lyre is not the cithara, *to play the lyre* is *καθαρίζειν* too, so there can be no doubt of the younger god encroaching on his elder's realm. Needless to say, appropriating what is others' is his speciality and privilege, but that is not the story told in the hymn: Hermes does not steal the lyre from Apollo, but contrarily, *gives it to him*. Let us consider how much of an usurpation that is exactly.

There are two options. When receiving the lyre from his brother, Apollo either already knows the phorminx as a separate instrument, or not. If the former is true, Hermes does infringe on Apollo's functional domain, but without quite raiding it, even though the value of his invention is diminished; just how much in awe of the lyre would you be if you already had the phorminx, or even (given the close relationship between the two mentioned above) the cithara? Only Apollo decidedly *is* in awe (v. 420–423): “And Phoebus Apollo laughed for joy; for the sweet throb of the marvellous music went to his heart, and a soft longing took hold on his soul as he listened.”²³

And soon after (ll. 436–445): “this thing you have made is worth fifty cows”, “this marvellous thing”, “a noble gift”, and “wonderful is this new-uttered sound I hear.” Finally (v. 450–453):

And though I am a follower of the Olympian Muses who love dances and the bright path of song —the full-toned chant and ravishing thrill of flutes —yet I never cared for any of those feats of skill at young men's revels, as I do now for this...

The serious god of music is so impressed with the clever child's invention that the whole scene has been interpreted in humorous terms, as a joke at Apollo's expense.²⁴ Since the *Hymn* does contain a few irreverent remarks directed at Leto's son (mostly as regards his divinatory art²⁵) that would actually make sense. But then the only instrument with which Apollo claims familiarity here is

²³ Still, it may be worth emphasizing the response of the fascinated god may be less emotional (and less like our modern-day reactions to beautiful music) than some translations suggest. Apollo is definitely impressed, but Kaimio (1974, 35) points out the “sweet longing” (*γλυκὸς ἔμερος*) taking hold of him is likely merely his desire to get the beautiful instrument for himself (cf. *ἔρος ἀμήχανος* in v. 434), not any music-induced tenderness of the heart. The same goes for the lyre's *ἰωή*, which is *ἐρατή*, but not so much “goes to his heart” as simply *is heard*. Cf. ll. 10,139, where Nestor wakes Odysseus with a shout and also *περὶ φρένας ἦλυθ' ἰωή*.

²⁴ So e.g. Podbielski 2005, 182.

²⁵ Cf. Podbielski 1963, 327–328 and 1966, 35.

the aulos, and I believe that a grave undertone can be detected here, same as in the encounter with the tortoise: an important myth lies hidden under the farcical humour.

Two more things argue for the latter possibility (that is, for the notion that by this stage Apollo already has or at least knows the phorminx, despite never mentioning it): first, as mentioned above the phorminx does pre-date the lyre in “real” (or, historical) time. Second, it may also pre-date the lyre in mythical time.

Now of course this myth-time²⁶ need not overlap the real or include any actual historical events, as it does not even run as normal time does. Seen from within, that is from the perspective of their own setting, the great works of earliest Greek epic poetry form a different sequence than the one they were probably created in. In the beginning, naturally, all was–Chaos, as one learns from Hesiod’s *Theogony* (l. 116), where the world emerges from timeless depths and only gradually takes the familiar and well-ordered shape. Generations of gods come and go until the rule of Zeus who lays the foundations for the world as we know it. Seen in this way, Homer’s poems are later; their world still differs from ours (and Hesiod would have it populated by a different, earlier human race), but the relationships between gods are more stable now, and Zeus’ reign, uncontested. In J. S. Clay’s opinion²⁷ the events of the *Homeric Hymns* fall somewhere between those two mythical eras, belonging to a time whose meaning can be summarized as Zeus ultimately consolidating his power and allotting the subordinate deities their cosmic functions.²⁸

Thus one could attempt to take the *Homeric Hymns* as a coherent whole, possibly even arranging them in some chronological order. Obviously the *Hymn to Apollo* would then come before the *Hymn to Hermes*, since in the former Apollo is born. And yet in the same hymn (*H. Hom. Ap.* 514–515): “they started out with the lord Apollo, the son of Zeus, to lead them, holding a phorminx in

²⁶Mythical time, *illud tempus*, is discussed in more detail in Clay (1989, 23–29), who pays special attention to the “grammatical chaos” of the Homeric hymns. And so in the opening lines of the *Hymn to Apollo* within the same scene the poet leaps from present tense to aorist and back, with a detour into imperfect on the way. Clay (1989, 27) writes that her review of oddly used verb forms in the hymns “implies a usage specific to *Homeric Hymns* and usually omitted from grammar books, not so much indicating an incomprehension or miss-application of tenses as serving to characterize the gods. Their actions, honours and epithets could very well be called timeless, not in the sense of standing outside of time, but in that their individual occurrences cannot be distinguished from their eternal manifestations.” In her opinion what we have here is not *praesens historicum* (unknown to Archaic epic poetry) or gnomic aorist as such, but rather a more specific phenomenon, typical of mythical narrative or perhaps of the epic Archaic hymn as a genre, the closest equivalent being the pre-Greek injunctive. Cf. Clay 1997, 494–495.

²⁷Clay 1989, 15 and 1997, 499. Richardson (2010, 7) has a similar idea.

²⁸Cf. *Th.* 881–885: *μάκαρες θεοὶ ... ὄτρυνον βασιλευμένῃ ἡδὲ ἀνάσσειν ... Ζῆν ἀθανάτων ὁ δὲ τοῖσιν ἐν διεδάσσατο τιμάς.*

his hands, and playing sweetly.” That would still not be a decisive argument, partly because myth-time, like dreamtime, follows its own laws, which need not always be quite *logical*, but also in part because a serious and detailed analysis of the *Hymns* as a supposedly chronologically coherent retelling of myth inevitably leads to contradictions. In the *Hymn to Apollo* (v. 200) Hermes already “plays” (*παίζει*; does that make him a child here?) with Ares on Olympus, even though in the *Hymn to Hermes* he is only born.

It is apparently necessary, in spite of certain difficulties, to return to the latter possibility and accept Hermes’ lyre as a thoroughly new invention, not merely original but critical. Going against history and archaeology, and to an extent against the mainstream mythical tradition, son of Zeus and Maia constructs the first instrument of the lyre family to come into the world²⁹ and proceeds to hand it to his brother, who thus becomes the god we know from other sources, the god with the phorminx. No wonder that extraordinary exploit, a clarification or perhaps completion of Apollo, who without it would remain merely “a follower of the Olympian Muses” (*ὀπηδός*, not even their leader) helps Hermes gain the respect of gods and men that he so desires and a place on Olympus. If that sounds a little paradoxical, the next few paragraphs shall defend that interpretation.

First, the terminological chaos surrounding string instruments does not come down to an interchangeability of the words *κίθαρις* and *φόρμιγξ*, or, for a while, of *κίθαρις*, *φόρμιγξ*, and *κιθάρα*. If today we categorize them together under the umbrella term *lyre*, that is because so did the ancients. So when encountering the word *λύρα* in the text, we still cannot be certain which exact instrument is meant; it might be the lyre proper, but then it might not. Of course in the *Hymn to Hermes* the lyre is indicated not so much by the word *λύρα* as by the way the instrument is made. However, as Maas and Snyder note: “Just as the word *lyre* may be used for the name of any instrument of the lyre family, so iconographic representations of the *chelys* often stand in for images of the cithara and sometimes for those of another instrument of that type.”³⁰ They mean vase paintings depicting typical situations, such as mythical scenes. Thus if Apollo’s

²⁹Against tradition not so much because of the competing myths, or actually legends, on the invention of the lyre or another, similar instrument by other characters—such as Orpheus or Terpander—as because it is hard to imagine a time in Apollo’s life when he did not yet have any string instrument and only accompanied the Muses as a singer or auletist. The mention of Orpheus inventing the lyre is from Timotheus (*Pers.* 221–223). On the other hand, in Pseudo-Plutarch (*De mus.* 14, Stephanus 1135n.) Soterichus in passing says that the cithara (*κιθάρα*) was invented by Apollo. Cf. also Callimachus’ *Hymn to Delos* (253–254, where Apollo *ἐνεδήσατο χορδάς*) and the above-quoted line 131 of the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (*κίθαρις*). An entirely different story is told by Diodorus Siculus (5.75.3): Hermes “invented the lyre out of a tortoise-shell after the contest in skill between Apollo and Marsyas, in which, we are told, Apollo was victorious and thereupon exacted an excessive punishment of his defeated adversary, but he afterwards repented of this and, tearing the strings from the lyre, for a time had nothing to do with its music.”

³⁰Maas and Snyder 1989, 81.

proper attribute is the cithara or the phorminx rather than the lyre, but we also have a (somewhat smaller) number of images where it is the lyre he holds, it should then be seen as a replacement attribute of sorts. The original reason for that may have been the fact that a lyre is easier to paint than a cithara, especially on a black figure vase, but it should come as no surprise that the phenomenon penetrated literary tradition as well, Apollo's ties to the lyre becoming only marginally weaker than those to the cithara.

We also ought to check where exactly in the *Hymn to Hermes* we find the words *φόρμιγξ* and *κίθαρις* (that is those which should theoretically mean the wooden phorminx and so might be regarded as used somewhat incorrectly). While they make the majority of all the terms for the lyre (cf. the list at the beginning of section 1), they all but one come after the lines 464–495 where the instrument becomes Apollo's. The single use of *φόρμιγξ* at the beginning of the hymn, in line 64, may well be intentional too. Hermes is clearly plotting something: “But while he was singing of all these, his heart was bent on other matters” (v. 62). I am guessing that by this stage he is already planning to win Apollo's appreciation and it is an association with the god more than metrical considerations that suggested the word *φόρμιγξ* to the poet. In other words, the lyre not only replaces the phorminx in the *Hymn*, even though the latter is more characteristic of Let's son, but also takes over its name on occasion—or, more precisely, takes it over where it acts in its target function of Apollo's attribute, whereas in its role of Hermes' invention it is less ambiguously called *χέλως* or *λύρα*.

There remains the paradox of a god receiving a gift of something seemingly rightfully his own from the start, but fortunately that is not an isolated case. J. Solomon³¹ lists three instances of this motif in Greek mythology. In the more familiar cases it is Zeus receiving his thunderbolts from cyclopes, and Athena receiving Gorgo's head from Perseus, and in both the giver is in some sense weaker than the receiver, just as Hermes is weaker than Apollo here. A regularity is not an explanation and in fact Solomon does not clarify how we ought to understand such unusual gifts. But at least it might mean that an interpretation in which Hermes gives Apollo something without which he would not, in fact, be Apollo (as Zeus would not be Zeus without his thunderbolts) is the right track.

1.3 WHAT COMPANION OF THE FEAST?

Let us now focus on one line of the text (l. 31) and an unusual epithet of the lyre used there. Hermes so addresses the tortoise he meets at the door: *χαῖρε φύην ἐρόεσσα χοροϊτύπε δαιτὸς ἐταίρη* (“Hail, comrade of the feast, lovely

³¹ Solomon 1994, 38.

in shape, sounding at the dance!”). He must be imagining the instrument already made, for what would a live tortoise be doing at a feast? Thus *δαιτὸς ἐταίρη* simply stands for the lyre,³² as confirmed by a later reference to it in the poem (v. 478–480): “Sing well with this clear-voiced companion in your hands; for you are skilled in good, well-ordered utterance. From now on bring it confidently to the rich feast....” In Homer,³³ too, “resounds the voice of the lyre, which the gods have made the companion of the feast” (*ἦν ἄρα δαιτὶ θεοὶ ποίησαν ἐταίρην*).

However, the crucial word in the line is *χοροῖτύπος*. Henryk Podbielski³⁴ appears to take it as a noun: “Hermes addresses the tortoise as the lyre and anthropomorphizes it as a beautiful companion of feasts and dancer in choruses [...] so that the lyre acquires some characteristics of a living thing [...]” Now of course that interpretation is possible; to “sound at the dance” could mean to beat out the rhythm with one’s foot, either as one dances or watches the performance, or even as one plays the lyre. However, Podbielski has this line in a slightly different reading as regards both punctuation and the accent; the lyre is here termed *χοροῖτυπος*:³⁵ *χαῖρε φυὴν ἐρόεσσα χοροῖτυπε δαιτὸς ἐταίρη*.

Dictionaries list several meanings of the word *χοροῖτυπος* and classify it into two groups depending on the accent. Two of those meanings are significant here:

1. *χοροῖτύπος, ον* Ep. for *χοροτύπος, ον* *beating the ground in the choral dance* gener. *dancing*;

2. *χοροῖτυπος, ον* *played for or to the choral dance*.³⁶

Moreover, Podbielski apparently chose the reading *χοροῖτυπε* with the dictionary meaning of *χοροῖτύπε*, while W. Appel reads *χοροῖτύπε* with a more ambiguous translation of “beating out the rhythm at the dance.” Since I do not think we are supposed to imagine the instrument personified and dancing, *χοροῖτυπος* must mean a way of playing the lyre: a typical manner which would make the association easier, as neither the word *φόρμιγξ* nor any other term for the lyre makes an appearance. But what would that mean for the lyre to “beat out the rhythm at the dance”, or “to be hit at the choral dance” like a drum or something?

Playing the lyre (playing the cithara even more so) evokes the images of virtuoso performances and the precise construction of sophisticated melodies rather than of simply marking the beat. Surely limiting the function of those

³² Cf. Damoulin 1992, 90 and Podbielski 1966, 41. The association is so strong West (*Homeric Hymns...* 2003, 146) actually emends Apollo’s apostrophe to Hermes from *πνεύμενε* (or *πνεύμενε*) *δαιτὸς ἐταίρη* to *πνεύμενε (πνεύμενε) δαιτὸς ἐταίρην*, “busy with the companion of the feast.”

³³ *Od.* 17.271.

³⁴ Podbielski 1966, 41.

³⁵ *χοροῖτύπε* *codd.*, *χοροῖτυπε* Matthiae (1805). Allen, Halliday and Sikes (*Homeric Hymns* 1936, 281) go back to *χοροῖτύπε*; while Càssola (*Inni omerici* 1992, 180) prefers the other version.

³⁶ *Słownik grecko-polski*. 1958. Ed. by Z. Abramowiczówna. Warszawa and *LSJ* svv.

elaborate instruments to rhythmical thrumming would be a waste? Still, it cannot hurt to take another look at the iconography.

Which indicates that all instruments in the lyre family were played predominantly by striking the strings with the plectrum (*κρέκειν, κρούειν*), and only secondarily and less often by plucking them with one's fingers (*ψάλλειν*), and the regularity is strong enough that Maas and Snyder³⁷ consider the *pektis* and the *magadis* relatives of the harp rather than the lyre precisely because playing them is always referred to as *ψάλλειν*. The plectrum would be held in one's right hand as the left supported the instrument (with the much heavier cithara additionally held up by a belt) and so had much less freedom of movement. In depictions of play we see it behind the strings and in one of several positions, all of which can be reduced to two actions: either plucking the strings or depressing them (in the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* the plectrum is already mentioned in v. 53 and then twice more).

The playing technique is discussed in West³⁸ and in Maas and Snyder.³⁹ In the most characteristic position, the cithara player holds the plectrum quite far from the strings and usually on the same side of the body as the instrument (that is, their left), either level with the strings or a bit lower, as if they had just finished a vigorous sweep across a number or all of the strings. Another typical position, which however implies the same method of play, is illustrated in Landels:⁴⁰ the citharist's right hand is on their right and bent at the elbow; the plectrum is held high and well away from the instrument. Body positions for playing the lyre (as distinct from simply carrying one or giving it to somebody) are analogous if adjusted a little for the different angle at which the instrument was commonly held. In their discussion of the lyre, Maas and Snyder also add: "It is only in five [out of over a hundred] images that the plectrum actually touches the strings, and none of them suggest that [...] the musician used it to pluck the strings individually."⁴¹ That in itself is also an interpretation, since if the plectrum had in fact been used to (among other things) pluck individual strings, the painter need not have shown that specifically, assuming instead that his customers knew how the instruments were played and omitting the detail. Still, the rarity of those images is striking.

Such a vigorous sweep with the plectrum across some or all of the strings together would make them sound quickly one after another, almost simultaneously (which is reminiscent of the epithet *consonant* mentioned above). In an instrument tuned for that, such as the modern guitar, that would be a chord. Maas and Snyder do warn their reader that the sound obtained in this

³⁷ Maas and Snyder 1989, 40.

³⁸ West 2003, 79–85; both the cithara and the lyre.

³⁹ Maas and Snyder 1989, 34 and 63 (the cithara) and 92 (the lyre).

⁴⁰ Landels 2003, 72.

⁴¹ Maas and Snyder 1989, 92 note 86.

way need not have been all that similar to the way string instruments sound to us today: “The Greeks left us no system of simultaneous tones”⁴² (that is, chords). But instruments *were* tuned, and there existed elaborate theories of harmonies and “scales” (*tonoi*), which did to an extent follow musical practice.⁴³ And while they were about the best intervals between *subsequent* rather than *simultaneous* pitches, we should probably suppose that musicians tuned the lyre (and the cithara) according to a specific harmony as well.⁴⁴ In other words, the sound made by sweeping the plectrum quickly across several strings might not have been a proper chord according to modern theories of music, but it must have been harmonious to the ears of the Greeks.

At any rate it was a loud and possibly slightly clang-like thrumming chord (or nearly a chord), more rhythmic than melodious and perfectly suited exactly for accompanying dance. (A similar role is played by the acoustic guitar in folk and popular music, and it, too, often requires the plectrum.) Aristophanes’ *τοφλαττοθρατ*⁴⁵ also implies the cithara had a sharp, almost percussive sound. Maas and Snyder summarize as follows:

It seems obvious that the rhythmic aspect of the sound of the lyre was of huge importance; more important, one could even argue, than its potential melodic function. A fast movement of the plectrum across the strings must have had an almost drum-like result, creating a rhythmic framework that was impossible to ignore.⁴⁶

Maas and Snyder use the term *lyre* throughout to refer to the lyre proper and other instruments of the same family.

Depressing individual strings with the fingers of one’s left hand may have suppressed the vibration, causing only some of the strings to sound even though the plectrum struck them all. Alternatively (and that is the more likely option) it may have shortened the actually vibrating length of the string allowing for higher pitched sounds to be made. Plucking (*ψάλλειν*) the strings with one’s left hand would have resulted in sounds quieter than those made with a plectrum,

⁴²Maas and Snyder 1989, 200.

⁴³E. g. Landels (2003, 53) believes that from around 450 BCE every aulos had a scale and when the musician wanted to play a piece in another scale they needed to switch to another instrument.

⁴⁴Unfortunately we cannot tell for certain how the tuning apparatus worked or therefore how often it was necessary to re-tune the instrument, but possibly often enough, before or even during each performance (Maas and Snyder 1989, 94). It is worth noting here the phrase *πλήκτρον ἐπειρήτιζε κατὰ μέλος* (or *κατὰ μέρος*: l. 53, 419 and 501) from the *Hymn*, which every time precedes a god’s citharody (Hermes’ twice and Apollo’s once); it could simply refer to tuning. Càssola (*Inni omerici* 1992) renders that *κατὰ μέλος / μέρος* “one string after another”; similarly Appel (*YMNOI OMHPIKOIYMNOI OMHPIKOI Czyli hymny homeryckie* 2001), “in turn” or “successively”, but West (*Homeric Hymns...* 2003), “in an attuned scale.” Kaimio (1974, 31–32) also believes it is about tuning.

⁴⁵Ar. *Ran.* 1286, 1288 and *sqq.*; cf. Maas and Snyder 1989, 65.

⁴⁶Maas and Snyder 1989, 200.

perhaps more appropriate for a solo cithara performance than accompaniment, whether of citharody or a dance, which does after all involve loud stomping (*χοροϊτύπειν* again!) It would have been impossible to hear the *ψάλλειν* sounds during *κρέκειν* too, so perhaps the two techniques were used in alternately.⁴⁷

Not all scholars agree with that interpretation of the iconography. Landels,⁴⁸ for instance, calls the manner of playing described above (vigorous striking with one hand while the other depresses some of the strings), “clumsy” and considers it unlikely. However, for any instrument in the lyre family that would have been the manner most suitable to accompany dancing, and accompanying dancing was, from Homer on, among the fundamental uses of the phorminx, the lyre, and the cithara.

2. THE CHARMS TO SOOTH A SAVAGE BEAST

*We know the tale of vengeance vowed—
How Phoebus stormed, while you looked cowed:
‘The herd must be recovered,
Rogue, that you took from me by guile,
Or else...’ But the god was forced to smile
Through rage when he discovered
His quiver too filched by a boy!*

This section deals with the pedagogical aspect of the *Hymn to Hermes*. I use this angle to investigate two major plot points in the poem, the lyre and the cattle theft, and I look into its performative context. I hope to demonstrate that those seemingly so disparate issues are actually all interrelated.⁴⁹

2.1. KUROTROPHOS, ENAGONIOS, PROMACHOS

The word *κουροτρόφος*, *-ov* (meaning *nurse; one who nourishes, feeds*, but also *rears, raises, educates*; whether young children or youths) is primarily an epithet of goddesses and geographical regions,⁵⁰ but Hermes was also worshipped

⁴⁷ Cf. West 2003, 81–82.

⁴⁸ Landels 2003, 73.

⁴⁹ For the major arguments of section 2 (mostly in 2.1, 2.2, and 2.4) I draw on S. I. Johnston’s (2002) paper. Only section 2.5 is not based on her work at all.

⁵⁰ Of Hera and Demeter: Burkert (2000, 184). Of Hecate: *Th.* 450. Eirene: *Op.* 228 and *H. Orph.*, e. g. 12.8. Of Artemis: Diod. Sic. 5.73.6. Of Ge: Paus. 1.22.3. Aphrodite: Hom. *Epigr.* 12. Ithaca: *Od.* 9.27. Delos: Callim., *In Del.* 276. The adjective could also stand alone as the name of a goddess, as it does in Aristophanes (*Thesm.* 295–300), where the chorus leader tells women to pray to Demeter, Kore, Plutos, Kalligeneia, Kurotrophos, the Charites and... Hermes.

under this name.⁵¹ In the sense of *one who takes care of young boys*, Hermes is *kurotrophos* regarding Asclepius, Dionysus, Heracles and the Dioscuri;⁵² in the sense of *one who educates young people*, he earns the epithet first of all as the patron god of the gymnasium.

The gymnasium (and the palaestra, which stands for it all but metonymically) was the most important Greek educational institution. With time, it opened its doors to education as we understand it today, but in the Archaic Period it still taught primarily how to be physically fit, and its method of instruction was, of course, sport. Gymnasia would be dedicated to all sorts of deities (such as in Athens the Lycaeum to Apollo, and the Academy to the hero Academus), but most often their patrons were Heracles or Hermes, who had images and altars there from the earliest times.⁵³ He was also reputedly the inventor of gymnastic exercise.⁵⁴

At first glance it might seem that this aspect of the god does not really fit his other facets very well. However, the mythical gestalt of Hermes as a cheeky but likeable liar and thief, while a motley, is quite consistent. The son of Maia guards thieves and cheats, true, but also heralds, messengers, merchants and other travellers, as well as orators, politicians and in general all those who live off their wits anywhere close to the boundaries defining lawfulness and honesty, be it on this or the other side of that line. And all these functions of his are given shape by the concept of movement and change, and especially of moving *through*, *over* or *across*. Movement to the other side, that is: one that crosses boundaries and breaks rules.⁵⁵ Besides, all the human activities mentioned above are examples of *ἐπαμοιβίμα ἔργα*, granted Hermes by Zeus (v. 516), of things changing hands or people exchanging some *winged words*. Even in his chthonic aspect of Psychopompus, which the *Hymn* only alludes to (v. 572–573) agrees with this picture: Hermes leads souls to their destination just as he leads lost travellers home, bringing them *over* to the other world just as he breaks (*ἀντιτοπεῖ*, *pierces through*; v. 178 and 283) into other people's homes. Still, where is the room in all that for sports, where after all movement is not about a transition from one place or state to another?

First of all we must remember that Greek sport was not an art for art's sake; yes it did provide an occasion to delight in the beauty and skill of young bodies

⁵¹ Whibley 1963, 310; non vidi.

⁵² Johnston (2002, 116) has a short list of literary occurrences and notes that while they are all relatively late, they are confirmed by vase paintings as early as the 6th century BCE. Of the later images in fine arts, the most famous one is Praxiteles 4th century Hermes with baby Dionysus on his arm.

⁵³ Paus. 3.24.7 and 4.32.1.

⁵⁴ Diod. Sic. 5, 73, 3; cf. *Inscr. Gr.* 14.978.

⁵⁵ Cf. Kahn 1978. Vernant (1996, 170) calls Hermes a "busy god of movement, exchanges and transitions."

and could undoubtedly be seen in aesthetic terms, although regarded from this perspective sport seems more static and may in fact approximate a work of art. Hermes' interest in sport I instead believe to lie with the dynamic competition of the boys and ephebi in his care.

No doubt such competition was already present during practice, but it would only fully manifest during the games the practice was for. No wonder then, that Hermes is also the patron god of games. Pindar and others refer to him in that aspect as *Agonios* and *Enagonios*,⁵⁶ as if in analogy to his travelling epithets of *Hodios* and *Enodios*. Let us however not lose sight of the educational sense of sport: if the gymnasium is a school, then games are examinations, possibly even *maturity* examinations. The young contestants took part in the *agon* in order to prove their strength and agility, because in their communities it was primarily physical strength and agility (and secondarily other traits taught by the gymnasium, such as courage and invulnerability to pain) that made an adult. Victory in games was a traditional ticket to citizenship. Thus the boys competed for status and prestige not only within their peer group, but also, and perhaps particularly, in the group of the adult men they aspired to. In the Archaic and Classical Periods sport was, in fact, the most natural path of social promotion from adolescent to adult. Therefore it is in his capacity *as* Kurotrophos that Hermes presides over the palaestra. And here too, as in his other aspects, he guides from one side and over to the other, to the other side of life: from childhood into adulthood. That is beautifully illustrated by a Boeotian myth transmitted by Pausanias, which I will cite below, since it will add one important and missing piece to this mosaic of sport, adolescence and Hermes: it will add war.

And the epithet *Promachus* was given Hermes, as they say, because after the fleet of Eretrians from Euboea landed in Tanagra, he led the ephebi into battle. And it was he himself who, armed with a strigil and having taken on the form of an ephebus, contributed the most to the defeat of Euboea.

2.2 IN FOR A CALF, IN FOR A COW

In that context it is somewhat disconcerting to find in the *Hymn to Hermes* not a single mention of sport or education, let alone war. Allen, Halliday and Sikes, inclined to date the poem to the 7th century BCE, perhaps around the same time as the *Odyssey*, suggest that Hermes' connection to sport "may have been omitted because the hymn was composed before organized athletics gained much importance in the lives of the Greeks."⁵⁷ But before we reconcile ourselves

⁵⁶*Pyth.* 2.10 (ἐναγώνιος Ἐρμῆς) and *Isthm.* 1.60 (ἀγώνιος Ἐρμῆς). *Ἐναγώνιος* also in Aristophanes (*Pl.* 1161) and Pausanias (5.14.9).

⁵⁷*Homeric Hymns* 1936, 268. However, those same authors have difficulties determining the subject matter of the *Hymn*. Johnston (2002, 110) believes the opposite, that the text of the hymn

to that, we should take a closer look at the single thread in our myth which approximates war the best, meaning robbery.

True, Hermes' raid on Apollo's cattle⁵⁸ is somewhat subdued, as if stylized: it is all quiet and non-violent, and if we are to believe Apollo when he recounts his loss to the old man in Onchestus (ll. 195–196) even dogs did not bark. Now that does sound like Hermes the cunning thief. It is only later, in ll. 254–259, that we get violence or only the promise of some:

Child, lying in the cradle, make haste and tell me of my cattle, or we two will soon fall out angrily. For I will take and cast you into dusky Tartarus and awful hopeless darkness, and neither your mother nor your father shall free you or bring you up again to the light, but you will wander under the earth and be the leader amongst little folk.

Such are the very first words by Apollo to Hermes. For a moment there, it looks like the two sons of Zeus will fight it out and we can only imagine the world holding its breath at the prospect of conflict on a cosmic scale. So, the story does have something to say about war; good thing it did not actually happen.

In fact those two phenomena, war and cattle raiding, share a common pre-history and symbolism in the cultures of peoples speaking Indo-European languages. In myth, they can be difficult to tell apart: B. Lincoln⁵⁹ cites examples from the Rigveda where the words *gośāti*, *gośuyudh* (*cattle raid*) and *gośu gam* (*to raid for cattle*) are used metonymically for *war* and *to go to war*; *to wage battle*. So also Nestor in the *Iliad*⁶⁰ tells of a raid he participated in as a young man as of an episode in the war between Pylos and Elis; interestingly, that raid was his baptism by fire. Among other Greek myths revolving around cattle theft, two more are relevant: that of Odysseus and the cyclopes, and that on Heracles' tenth labour. Now the hero was to drive to Argos the herd of Geryon, a monster that lived at the farthest ends of the earth, and of course had to prove his courage while he was at it, nor was it accomplished without a fight.

All such stories display a shared pattern underneath.⁶¹ Its most concise

and athletics complement each other, as a myth related to a ritual need not reflect it but may complement it instead.

⁵⁸Or perhaps Admetus' cattle grazed by Apollo. But then Hermes drives the herd from Pieria, "where the divine cattle of the blessed gods had their steeds" (v. 71).

⁵⁹Lincoln 1981, 102–103; non vidi; found in: Johnston 2002, 112 note 14. Cf. e.g. *RV* 8.54.7; 2.2.22; 2.54.4.

⁶⁰11.669–761. The episode is softened by the fact that the war in question was retaliatory, but it need not have been so in the original myth at all.

⁶¹Lincoln (1976) analyzes it drawing not only on Graeco-Roman myths and legends, but also Indian, Iranian and others. The Roman illustration is the story of Hercules and Cacus. Yet Lincoln does not really mention Hermes' raid, in spite of distinct similarities between that myth and the story of Cacus. Propertius (*Eleg.* 4.9, ll. 11–12) says even that Cacus *ne certa forent manifestae*

version is as follows: the young hero sets out to meet the enemy, often a monster, fights it, emerges victorious, and leaves with the loot, which tends to be a herd of cattle. The successful raid raises his prestige and grants him acclaim and respect, regardless of whether his actions were provoked (as is the norm in later, moralizing versions) or not. Drawing on the work of Lincoln, Burkert and others, Johnston⁶² notes this, too, is actually about the transition from a male child to a man. To the nomadic, herd-grazing peoples that settled in the Balkan Peninsula in the 2nd millennium BCE and gave rise to Greek civilization, successful cattle theft must have indicated manly skill and courage, emphatically demonstrating that the young man would manage in life, that is, would be able to support a family.⁶³ Actually, baby Hermes says loud and clear that is exactly his point (v. 166–168, addressing his mother): “Nay, but I will try whatever plan is best, and so feed myself and you continually. We will not be content to remain here, as you bid, alone of all the gods unfee’d with offerings and prayers.”

Just as Nestor did, on his return from a raid a youth would join the ranks of the full members of his community, or, in other words, of the warriors. It should not come as a surprise then if a trace of that ancient custom survived, in the imagination if not in practice, until historical times. Homeric society is still made up by the warriors; the body politic of an Archaic polis continues to be a community of hoplites. Likewise Hermes clearly wants his banditry to win him a place among the metaphorical “full grown up citizens” of his worlds, the gods. One important discrepancy remains to be explained between this specific myth and the pattern outlined above: Apollo, whose cows Hermes steals, does not in the slightest resemble Cacus or Geryon, or the savage Polyphemus.

The difficulty is resolved by a closer examination of the character of Apollo in the *Hymn to Hermes*. While the threats he utters mean he retains some characteristics of the terrifying Ur-monster from the dawn of myth reflected later in Cacus, Geryon, the cyclopes and the like,⁶⁴ he mostly seems to appear in the role of a typical representative of the group Hermes aspires to. This is what

signa rapinae // aversos cauda traxit in antra boves, with that detail attested also by Virgil (*Aen.* 8.209–210), Livy (1.7.5), Ovid (*Fasti* 1.550), and Martial (5.65.6).

⁶² Johnston 2002, 112.

⁶³ Moreover, a man’s honour depended directly on his possessing herds and his ability to protect them from raiders. That applied to gods as well: in the *Odyssey* (12.382–383) Helios says of Odysseus’ companions, who have captured and slaughtered the best cows in his herd: “If they do not pay me fit atonement for the kine I will go down to Hades and shine among the dead..” I do not think he says those words out of vengeful spite, as the whole world would be punished by such an action; shame seems a much more likely reason. Cf. Sowa 1984, 161–166.

⁶⁴ That is, the threats spoken in the lines 254–259 quoted above. Harrell (1992, 319–320) shows how poorly they fit Apollo’s actual position in the pantheon. The son of Leto seems to be imitating the language of Zeus, who uses similar words to show the other gods their place (e.g. *Il.* 8.12–16). Book 8 of the *Iliad* was probably evoked not only by the words *βαλῶν ἐς Τάρταρον ἠερόντα* (~ *ἐλὼν ῥίγω ἐς Τάρταρον ἠερόντα*), but also the *οὐ κατὰ κόσμον* just before.

Hermes himself has to say on the matter (v. 172–173): “as regards honor, I too will enter upon the rite that Apollo has.”

The elder god is rich not merely in honours, but also material wealth, owning as he does a great temple (*δόμος*, *abode*) and a herd of beautiful cows. There is a hint here of another opposition between the two gods: what we have here is not just a younger brother confronting his elder sibling, but also a youth challenging a man whose position is well established, and in that light one could try to modify the pattern delineated above. Perhaps it comes in another form as well: here a young hero (a youth aspiring to manhood) sets out to steal the cattle which belongs, not to a monster or dangerous giant this time, but rather to a grown and respected man from his own community. If he succeeds and then manages to appease the opponent, not only will he prove his maturity, but also win a friend and patron in the man he has robbed. Sounds paradoxical, but stranger things were required in the murky twilight of early Antiquity of young people on the cusp of adulthood.⁶⁵

That such a custom used to exist, or at least that it was known from myth, is confirmed by two traces. One of them is a story transmitted in Plutarch (*Thes.* 30), about the first meeting and the onset of friendship between Theseus and Pirithous. Now Theseus came to like and respect the Thessalian after he stole a herd of his cattle that was grazing near Marathon. The other trace lies in the results of research by Campbell, Herzfeld and Haft⁶⁶ cited by Johnston, who report on a custom just like that being practised in Crete until today and compare it, among other things to the story told in the *Hymn to Hermes*.

2.3 IN SEARCH OF A PERFORMATIVE CONTEXT

I hope I have managed to demonstrate so far in this section that Hermes' nocturnal outing, which makes the core of the narrative in the *Hymn*, has a close connection to this god's patronage over the coming of age process of (male) Greek youth. It would then be very appropriate if it were the youth who came into contact with this poem the most often, preferably in some context to do with growing up, and so I will now look at the hymn's performative context.

⁶⁵Burkert (1983, 83–92) roughly re-constructs the form of Arcadian initiation rites in honour of Zeus Lycaeus, which had elements of lycanthropy and human sacrifice (probably fake human sacrifice, but the participants would have had to believe it genuine). In some shape, that ritual persisted into Hellenistic times. It is interesting that it was carried out in Arcadia, the home of Hermes, in whom it is possible to see some wolfish characteristics too (cf. *Inni omerici* 1992, 161–162). On the subject of the more civilized passage rites of the Classical period, see e. g. Bruit-Zaidman and Schmitt-Pantel 1999, 65–72.

⁶⁶Campbell 1964 (non vidi), Herzfeld 1985 (non vidi), Haft 1996, 27–48 (non vidi). Seen in: Johnston 2002, 113 note 16.

Like many others surrounding the hymn, the issue is unclear and controversial, with virtually every attempt to answer it contested. First of all, it is common to see all the hymns in the “Homeric” collection as rhapsodic *proemia* for longer epic recitations, presumably of the heroic epics.⁶⁷ However, some scholars believe that impossible in the case of the longer hymns with an elaborate *pars media*, precisely because of their length,⁶⁸ whereas Clay⁶⁹ uses two different songs by Demodocus in the *Odyssey* to distinguish between a rhapsodic performance of a short hymn as a typical *prooemium* and an aoidic performance of a long one as an independent epic composition, the former in public, in the agora or during a religious festival, and the latter in a narrow circle of feasting aristocrats. Actually, I do not suppose we need to worry about the length of the larger hymns in the rhapsodic context; since reciting all of the *Iliad* could easily take three days if not longer, why not allow a three-hour *prooemium*?

Another unclear issue surrounding the *Homeric hymns*, including the *Hymn to Hermes*, is their relationship to worship. The question is difficult not only to answer but even to ask, mostly because we are no longer today quite certain what exactly the Archaic Greeks would have meant by the “cultic nature” of a work of poetry. Clay, for instance, considers the *Homeric hymns* “remote from ritual practice,”⁷⁰ although at the same time she acknowledges that the shorter hymns at least may have been performed during religious festivals, whereas in the case of the longer ones, “the narrative, although it is of events set in distant mythical past, will cause the gods to appear for the listeners, bring about their epiphany through a retelling of their deeds.”⁷¹ (And here one could be thinking it would be hard to ask for a better ritual.) Podbielski’s summary of scholarly consensus sounds somewhat similar: “Today we tend to accept the balanced opinion of E. Wünsch, who claimed that while any close connection of the *Hymns* to religious cult is out of the question, they do indirectly involve it in that they contain praise of the deity and were recited on the occasion of a religious festival.”⁷²

⁶⁷E.g. *Homeric Hymns...* 2003, 3. A brief summary of that discussion can be found in Podbielski 2005, 157–163; cf. also Clay 1997, 495–498.

⁶⁸E.g. Allen, Halliday and Sikes (*Homeric Hymns* 1936, xciv–xcv), Notopoulos 1962, 342, *YMNOI OMHPIKOI* 2001, 14.

⁶⁹Clay 1997, 496–498. Cf. Demodocus’ *prooemium* (*Od.* 8.499: *θεῶν ἤρχετο*), preceding his song of the deeds of heroes at Troy, and his “hymn proper” (*Od.* 8.266–366). And yet it was that hymn, a song “of the love of Ares and Aphrodite of the fair crown” that is performed during games, and the heroic and prooemiumed “Trojan Horse” which is done at a private feast. Now if the *Odyssey* reflected actual aoidic roots of rhapsodic performance here, ought it not to be the other way round?

⁷⁰Clay 1997, 483 and 489.

⁷¹Clay 1997, 493. Clay struggled already with the paradox of whether and to what extent the major Homeric hymns are cultic in her excellent earlier work dealing with them (1989). On the one hand, she was inclined to consider them theological (p. 267), and on the other (p. 7) she thought they were performed aoidically at feasts (“*dais*, or what would be later called *symposion*”).

⁷²Podbielski 2005, 158.

Now that opinion may be balanced, but that does not make it any less strange, for what can be more “cultic” than a poem which praises a god, especially if it was performed on a festival? I suspect the authors of that view mean to stress that *Homeric Hymns* are “literary” rather than cletic. And indeed they do not have cletic composition,⁷³ with the exception of the customary *χαῖρε* (to which I intend to return shortly), the poet might never address a god, keeping to the *Er-stil* throughout. Possibly this is to suggest that even if these hymns were sung or recited on the occasion of a festival, it was not around the altar, right before or right after a sacrifice. But why not?⁷⁴

A determined argument against drawing a sharp line between the secular and the holy in Greek Archaic poetry can be found in García,⁷⁵ who believes each early hymn can be considered cletic, regardless of whether it contains an apostrophe. It is not the form that is decisive, but rather the actual circumstances of the performance and the function of the poem (characteristics absent from the text itself). Just as Clay does, García believes if a performance of a longer *Homeric Hymn* was successful (technically correct and perhaps acknowledged by a good omen), the rhapsode and his audience were in the position to experience an epiphany of the deity sung: “The *Homeric Hymns* cause the deity to be present by elevating it to a plot thread; they tell the story of a god visiting so that he actually does, for cult purposes. That is the primary *internal* indicator of the ritual context for their performance....”

Certainly epiphany is the most significant motif shared by all the larger *Hymns*.⁷⁶ (In the *Hymn to Hermes* that motif is present the least and the only event witnessed by a mortal is cattle theft.) However, the rhapsode (or another performer) cannot have achieved his goal mechanically by rattling of memorized text; it was crucial that he proved his skill and knowledge of the god he sang, since it was that skill and knowledge which gave him a right to expect that the god will respond, and respond favourably. That showing off of religious and poetic art lay not just in listing epithets, but most of all in the narrative itself. As regards its function, García compares that narrative part to the shorter *historiolae* of magical spells, and in so doing he goes against another traditional

⁷³I.e. they need not contain elements such as the name of a god in the vocative, the *κλῆθί μου* formula, other imperatives, appeals to a past mutually good relationship with the god, or an elaborate request; cf. Podbielski 2005, 163.

⁷⁴One of the answers given sometimes is, “because the Homeric hymns are funny! Did the gods not deserve more serious treatment?” Johnston (2002, 109) dismantles that line of criticism ironically, saying, “It would seem we should accept that Greek worship did not bring people any joy!” One example of coarse humour combined harmoniously with religious practice is the aeschrology found in the cult of Demeter.

⁷⁵García 2002, 5–6. His views I quote in this paragraph and the next come from the same paper, from pp. 6, 9, 12, 21 and 33; italics in the original. Richardson (2010, 8) also believes the Homeric hymns, as being “inspired by the gods”, can bring their audience closer to the divine.

⁷⁶Cf. Sowa 1984, 236–238.

distinction (next to the one between cultic and literary songs): between religious and magical discourse.⁷⁷

García's analysis makes it imperative that we take a fresh look at the word *χαῖρε*, common to many of the *Hymns*,⁷⁸ from long to very short ones. It is certainly a salutation addressed at the deity, but is it in greeting or in parting? Just like *salve* and *ave* in Latin, *χαῖρε* can be used in either situation, even though the former is more common. Still, translators seem to prefer to either render it ambiguously as *hail*, or decide unambiguously on *farewell*, as if assuming that the god was present for the whole recitation and will only now take his leave. In García's opinion the reverse is true: only taken as a whole, the hymn becomes an (indirect, symbolic) *clesis*, of which the *χαῖρε* is the triumphal crowning point.⁷⁹ The presence of the god is sought, not for the duration of the performance, but for whatever will follow it, presumably for a public ceremony of some sort. Nor should we expect any public ceremony other than the religious kind, as none other existed.⁸⁰ In the *polis* gods oversee all matters of the state and important social and political events, and it is normal to honour them with sacrifices on any such occasions.

So, what kind of ceremony or public event would have made the perfect setting for a recitation of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*? Something to do with youth and growing up? A festival to Hermes? Games, perhaps? Luckily it is possible to put forward a solution which satisfies all three conditions.

2.4. HERMAEA

It was the *Hermaea* (*Ἑρμῆα*) that Johnston⁸¹ suggested as a solution for the puzzle mentioned above: a festival to Hermes celebrated for some centuries in

⁷⁷ Nor is that unjustified. Graf (1997, esp. 196) stresses the similarity between magical and religious prayers (including literary, poetic prayers whose structure resembles that of a hymn) and concludes it is not the prayer itself, not the actual words uttered, that distinguish magical rituals from non-magical ones. He does not think the attitude to the deity, ranging from obsequious humility to ordering the gods about, an unambiguous criterion either. (*A historiola* is a miniature narrative, usually mythical and expressed in past tenses, which gives a spell its power to change reality, say heal the sick.) Cf. Kotansky 1997, 112.

⁷⁸ In the *Hymn to Hermes*, l. 579.

⁷⁹ *Χαῖρε* is apparently the appropriate response of a mortal who has just seen a god (or thinks they have). In the Homeric hymns it is spoken by Anchises to Aphrodite (*H. Hom. Ven.* 92), by the captain of the Cretan ship to Apollo (*H. Hom. Ap.* 466), and by Metanira to Demeter (*H. Hom. Cer.* 213, a little late perhaps, particularly as she does not recognize her for a goddess, but cf. 189–190, where “awe and reverence and pale fear took hold of” the queen. J. Danielewicz (1976, 33) also believes *χαῖρε* to be a formula of “a solemn salutation (a greeting rather than a farewell).” And besides the salutation, *χαῖρε* expresses the *xenia*-relationship between gods and humans, which is about reciprocal *charis*. Cf. Danielewicz 1976, 33–34 and Race 1982, 8–10.

⁸⁰ Cf. e.g. Świderkówna 1994, 34.

⁸¹ Johnston 2002, 116–117. She has a list of Ancient testimonies on the *Hermaea*, most of them epigraphic. The only mentions in literature are those in Plato (*Lys.* 206d), Aeschines (*in Tim.*

many parts of the Greek world, complete with games. The agon was open to *παῖδες*, *νεανίσκοι*, *νέοι*, and possibly *ἔφηβοι*, with all these terms seen as denoting clear-cut age groups. We can suppose that adult men (*ἄνδρες*) were not allowed to take part in at least some Hermaea; according to Aeschines, it is possible they could not even have attended as spectators, under the sanction of the Athenian law.⁸² It is not clear how far into the past the tradition of the festival went, but already around 460 BCE, the Pellenian version attracted participants from all over Greece,⁸³ implying they were founded no later than the late 6th or early 5th century. Since that date is roughly appropriate for the *Hymn to Hermes* as well,⁸⁴ it is possible it was composed for exactly this occasion—or for some other, similar one. Of course Clay⁸⁵ is right to point out that “there is no convincing evidence to make us connect the *Hymn to Hermes* to any specific festival”, and all we have here is an attractive hypothesis, not proven historical fact. Still, I intend to accept that as a working theory until the end of section 2, so should the reader hear too much certainty to my tone, I must ask them to soften it for me with an inserted “maybe” or some such other hedge.

It remains to consider what those well-born boys *heard* at the Hermaea when the *Hymn to Hermes* was performed. The atmosphere of the games must have mattered. I think in the light of what I have said above on the educational sense of sport, competition and Hermes, as well as of what we know on the Hermaea being targeted at youth, we can safely assume that they, too, were a form of initiation: they spurred the young people to put some effort into the process of growing up, to show off in front of their peers and, indirectly at least, if they were in fact barred from entering, in front of their elders. Thus they primarily heard in the *Hymn*, were meant to hear in it, its allusion to the “young warrior test” outlined above. After all, Hermes’ roguish raid is made to stand out all the more by being the only divine action in the story to be witnessed by a mortal: the only epiphany. They also had to understand this ruffianly tale as a metaphor or symbol for manliness and manhood, since had they taken it literally and proceeded to steal and butcher the neighbour’s cow the next morning, neither the community nor themselves would have profited. The times had changed by then and young aristocrats no longer had to prove themselves in ways so drastic: they

10), and Pausanias (8.14.10–11), plus a number of indirect references to the Hermaea in Pellene (including Pind. *Nem.* 10.44, *Ol.* 7.86 and *Ol.* 9.98, with scholia).

⁸²Aeschin. *In Tim.* 1.12. However, the law cited here was probably inserted in the text by a later ancient editor; Aeschines himself only says the law-giver “regulates the festivals of the Muses in the school-rooms, and of Hermes in the wrestling-schools.”

⁸³The participants of those games sung by Pindar, Diagoras and Epharistos, came from Rhodes and Opus, and contestants from Argos are mentioned.

⁸⁴Janko 1982, 142–143. Richardson (2010, 24) thinks the *Hymn to Hermes* may even be considerably earlier than 500 BCE, since at the time vase paintings still indicate a connection between the syrinx and Hermes, rather than with Pan, as is the case in later times.

⁸⁵Clay 1989, 7.

had games for that. At any rate I imagine the young god's theft was in fact *theirs* and they identified with him one way or another. There are many solutions in the *Hymn* to facilitate that: easy, occasionally obscene humour, casually introduced sympotic motifs,⁸⁶ and especially Hermes being depicted as a sassy brat who talks back to his big brother, has no fear of his mum or dad and will not sit still a moment, ever in a hurry to go off all excited about his most recent idea.

Of course any such identification with this Hermes would have required them to give free rein to their imagination: a newborn baby is no teenager. But he *behaves* like one, and that is enough. Càssola⁸⁷ points out gods in general grow up quickly. May these words by baby Apollo (*H. Hom. Ap.*, 130–134) provide an apt illustration:

Forth-with Phoebus Apollo spoke out among the deathless goddesses: "The *citharis* and the curved bow shall ever be dear to me, and I will declare to men the unfailing will of Zeus." So said Phoebus, the long-haired god who shoots afar and began to walk upon the wide-pathed earth...]

That is not the voice of a toddler, but rather of an arrogant adolescent clearly letting the goddesses know who is in charge. It is worth noting that it is women that Apollo addresses so haughtily; immortal, yes, but still women, as if stressing the fact that he is no longer a child if neither his mother nor other goddesses can control him. A similar note can be heard in Hermes' conversation with Maia (ll. 154–183), and one scholar⁸⁸ goes so far as to suggest that her role in the hymn is so major compared to other renderings of the myth about baby Hermes precisely so the poet can show him leaving her tutelage and with it, the world of women, thus becoming a man.

One other character in the *Hymn* receives more attention than the other versions of the myth accord him: Apollo. As Johnston⁸⁹ notes, he has more lines even than Hermes, whose hymn this is after all. The author greatly emphasizes the conflict between the brothers, of whom the elder is clearly the privileged one, yet falls prey to the younger brother's misconduct, all the while being his role model and inspiration: Hermes looks for his *timai* in the functions of a shepherd and oracle (as opposed to, shall we say, a hunter or sailor) precisely *because* they are Apollo's honours in the *Hymn*.⁹⁰

⁸⁶Ll. 54–56, 436, 453–454, 475–482. I shall return to those in section 2.5.

⁸⁷*Inni omerici* 1992, 518. Other examples of baby gods exhibiting adult behaviour could be Athena (who was born "arrayed in warlike arms of flashing gold": *H. Hom.* 28.4–9), Artemis (who right after being born helped her mother give birth to her twin: *Bibl.* 1.4.1), Heracles (who throttled two deadly snakes as a babe in the cradle), and possibly Zeus (who made the horn of plenty as an infant).

⁸⁸Haft 1996, 33–34 (non vidi). Found in: Johnston 2002, 114, note 22.

⁸⁹Johnston 2002, 119.

⁹⁰It is probably in the same terms as these, that is as emulation, that we should see Hermes' interest in music. Although apparently not his interest in the lyre as such if, as I tried to demonstrate

The trope, with the younger brother making a fool of the elder one, sibling rivalry where their status in their father's eyes is at stake, is of course humorous, not least because it brings gods down to earth, to the level of standard human family relationships. In itself it could have made it easier for the listeners, who may have had older and stronger brothers too, to identify with the protagonist. Still, I suppose the contrast between a younger and elder brother gave way in their view to another, sharper and more acute at that point in their lives: that between an adolescent and an adult. There are numerous analogies between their situation and Hermes'. I think it possible they heard of the uncertainty of their young hero, who at first does not even know whether he is a god or a mortal,⁹¹ but stubbornly keeps looking for the place he belongs, and perceived in it an echo of their own uncertainty and confusion as teenagers who do not belong either, being as they are no longer children, but not yet grown-ups. At the same time, the complexity of the relationship between Hermes (who is still looking) and Apollo (who found it quite a while ago), complexity which included lies, hurt, threats,⁹² appeals to the authority of an all-powerful father, mutual gifts and finally true friendship, reflected the ambiguity of their position as regards the adult world. That ambiguity is quite aptly expressed by Johnston: "In order to join the adults, the boys must both challenge and appease them; the adults in their turn need to both keep the youths in check and grant them enough freedom that they can show their mettle."⁹³

Right. Hardly any change there for the last two and a half thousand years, then.

2.5. EDUCATING THE SOUL

Not only does Hermes invent the lyre and gift it to Apollo, but also tries his own skill at citharody twice (the hymn does not once feature playing the instrument without singing to accompany). The first song, recounted in lines 55–61, revolves around his parents and the wealth of his home. In the second (v. 427–433) the young god sings

in section 1, it was altogether unknown before the Cyllenian first made one. The ambiguity of Hermes as the patron of herds on the one hand, and their thief on the other is discussed in *Inni omerici* (1992, 162).

⁹¹ Clay 1989, 111–112.

⁹² We can now view those from another perspective. The threat is "you will wander under the earth and be the leader amongst little folk", which can be taken to mean "you will remain a child forever." As an adult, Apollo has the power to invite Hermes to the group of grown-up gods or bar him from it.

⁹³ Johnston 2002, 122.

the story of the deathless gods and of the dark earth, how at the first they came to be, and how each one received his portion. First among the gods he honored Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, in his song; for the son of Maia was of her following. And next the goodly son of Zeus hymned the rest of the immortals according to their order in age, and told how each was born, mentioning all in order...

It is striking in what detail the poet relays those two performances, and how they differ. They are no doubt both important parts of the *Hymn* and have been much interpreted in literature. It is for example possible to interpret the first song as a somewhat dirty joke, congruent I suppose with the tone of the whole poem: a young child praising the clandestine and adulterous affair of his parents. Are we to guess at a connection between their trysts after dark and Maia's suggestive wealth?⁹⁴ The other song, however, is a theogony in its own right, and the fact that it lists the gods by the order in which they were born (*according to their order in age, κατὰ πρῆσιν*) lets one suspect that right at the end Hermes makes a mention of himself as the youngest of the Olympians, thus underlining his ambitions or his claim.

Perhaps, then, there is some evolution to be seen in that sequence of two songs already as regards the things baby Hermes has to say about his standing. In his own opinion he is promoted from an illegitimate son, clearly an outsider to the privileged group, to that group's youngest yet full-fledged member; he may even be somehow special there if he is of the "following" of Mnemosyne (*ἡ γὰρ λάχε Μαιάδος υἱόν*, whatever *that* means⁹⁵). Still, even more progress is visible in the subject matter itself. The first song is modest in how it limits itself to the immediate surroundings, home and family of a baby; one could go as far as to say Hermes celebrated, too, the handmaids of the nymph, and her bright home, and the tripods all about the house, and the abundant cauldrons⁹⁶ because that is the scope of his life experience so far.⁹⁷ Then the second song deals with matters fundamental to the cosmic order; a *Theogony* and a *De rerum natura* rolled all into one, it attempts to reach the ends of reality. Johnston⁹⁸ notes the difference between the two songs is symbolic of the great change which occurs in Hermes, *during the cattle raid*, since that is the event centrally positioned in the poem. It also helps understand why, unlike Sophocles and any predecessors he might have had, the author of the *Hymn* places the invention of the lyre *before* the cattle

⁹⁴ That kind of interpretation is suggested by Kerényi (1993, 26).

⁹⁵ It is difficult to say why Memory should have "received" Hermes, or why he should have "fallen to" her. Perhaps the poet is alluding to some connection between Hermes and epic poetry or hymnic epic poetry specifically, today no longer clear to us; cf. Clay 1989, 139. Unless this, too, is about education; memorizing is after all a form of learning.

⁹⁶ Ll. 60–61.

⁹⁷ That is also one way to understand his repeated *αἷ τινες αἱ βόες εἰσί· τὸ δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούω* (v. 277, false by then, and l. 311, modified).

⁹⁸ Johnston 2002, 124.

theft, achieving ring composition,⁹⁹ in which the motif of the lyre comes split in two, one part prior to the raid and one afterwards. In Johnston's¹⁰⁰ opinion, "it is the theft of the cattle and its consequences that allow Hermes to cross from the small domestic sphere of his birth to the larger social sphere of the gods in which he is determined to play a role." In other words, the robbery has been educational, bringing Hermes closer to his goal of figurative adulthood.

Now it would be odd if in this context, so saturated with didactic and educational ideas, music did not have another, more clearly pedagogical role to play. Socrates¹⁰¹ calls music education for the soul (*ἡ ἐπὶ ψυχῆ παιδεία* next to gymnastics as *ἡ ἐπὶ σώμασι παιδεία*), and by *music* he means both the melody and rhythm expressed through voice and instruments, and the poetry of the text. Classical and Hellenistic literature in general is filled with comments on the pedagogical impact of *musike*, with Plato trying hard to come across as the loudest; he repeatedly mentions music alongside sport, in the context of both the idealized education of the guardians and the actual training of Athenian youth in his time.¹⁰² Thus in the most general terms it is possible to claim the following is true for *paideia* (culture¹⁰³) and gymnastics (or sport): *musike* + *gymnastike* = *paideia*.

We can trust the author of the *Symposium* on that, despite the century intervening between him and the Hermaea and the probable date of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, and despite his complex and critical attitude to musical education. To quote W. Jaeger:

To claim that the attitude to a work of art was morally neutral [...] would have been totally alien to the Greek understanding of those things. Of course one cannot recklessly generalize the particularly rigorous postulates Plato deduces from the educational mission of poetry, but the way he approaches these things is hardly only his own. Rather, he has it in common, not only with all of the earlier Greek tradition, but also with his contemporaries...¹⁰⁴

The stubborn fierceness with which [Plato in the *Republic*] fights for a reform of poetry is clearly based on the conviction that the pedagogical influence of music and poetry, its effectiveness confirmed by centuries of experience, cannot be replaced.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Cf. Podbielski 1963, 322–323.

¹⁰⁰ Johnston 2002, 124.

¹⁰¹ Pl. *Resp.* 2.376e.

¹⁰² E. g. *Cri.* 50d, *Resp.* 3.403c, *Leg.* 7.795d–e. Earlier by one generation, Democritus (fr. 179) lists *γράμματα*, *μουσική* and *ἀγωνίη* as components of education and believes they develop *αἰδώς* in a person, which he considers the highest form of *arete*. Aristotle (*Pol.* 8.1337b) adds drawing as a fourth item.

¹⁰³ The terms *παιδεία* and *cultura* are equated by W. Jaeger (2001, most unequivocally perhaps on p. 393).

¹⁰⁴ Jaeger 2001, 784–785.

¹⁰⁵ Jaeger 2001, 793.

There is evidence for such pedagogical and educational view of song being the heritage of the Archaic Period, if not of earliest times, in the *Hymn to Hermes* itself, in its message of robbery and war aimed at future citizens. There are also traces of that concept of Music in Homer, primarily in Book 9 of the *Iliad*. Relatively quiet in terms of action, focused as it is on the scene of the embassy and on the virtues and vices of a few characters, Book 9 had a huge impact on Greek *paideia*.¹⁰⁶

Odysseus, Ajax and Achilles, the greatest Greek heroes of the *Iliad*, all three appear side by side, in conflict, no less, so the audience may examine closely the ideal of the Homeric aristocrat and warrior, and specifically, examine his *arete*. Ajax' *arete* is typical manliness: strength and courage. Odysseus, as well, is shown possessed of his characteristic traits: intelligence and convincing eloquence. At first, Ajax and Phoenix leave it to him to appease Achilles and he approaches the task with great skill but still fails. Achilles in turn is described by the poet, in his father's and tutor's intentions at least, as both a "speaker of words" and a "doer of deeds." In *Il.* 9.438–443, Phoenix says:

It was to thee that the old horseman Peleus sent me on the day when he sent thee to Agamemnon, forth from Phthia, a mere child, knowing naught as yet of evil war, neither of gatherings wherein men wax pre-eminent. For this cause sent he me to instruct thee in all these things, to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.

Whatever does it mean that the warrior hero and the politician hero both lose to Achilles, who combines the *aretai* of each?

In fact, that complex scene contains more than one comment on education and the "virtue", or *arete* which is its goal. In particular it stresses the tutor's helplessness regarding his pupil, for which purpose Phoenix cites the myth of Meleager's wrath, but I believe it also provides a contrast-rich picture of *arete* of highest quality, with the poet demonstrating Achilles' superiority to other heroes. It is probably the reason earlier the envoys find him playing the phorminx (*Il.* 9.185–189):

And they [...] found him delighting his soul with a clear-toned lyre, fair and richly wrought, whereon was a bridge of silver; this had he taken from the spoil when he laid waste the city of Eëtion. Therewith was he delighting his soul, and he sang of the glorious deeds of warriors...

The hero of all times is shown in sharp contrast to the others, occupying himself with music. It is not random that he sings of "the glorious deeds of warriors" or that this kind of subject matter "delights his soul", but I believe that as regards the composition, it is the very act of playing the phorminx that matters

¹⁰⁶ Homer's fundamental role in *paideia* is attested to by Xenophanes (fr. 10.2). Cf. Plato's particularly critical remarks in *Resp.* 2. 378c–d. Cf. West 1999, 379.

the most, with music acting as the third form of *arete*, comparable to those of Ajax and Odysseus, and even surpassing them.¹⁰⁷

It is by all means about musical skill in the sense we are used to, that is singing and playing an instrument. In Classical times, playing the lyre was taught at schools, as evidenced by many vase paintings;¹⁰⁸ when it is not in use, the lyre can sometimes be seen to the side, presumably hung on a wall. Before schools became commonplace, it was already an important part of education. Here, the poet dozens of generations grew up on stresses its value, as though unwilling to lose sight of it completely in a work so caught up in deeds of war. Nor may we forget the Archaic Period still knows no poetry as separate from song, and is only seeing the birth of prose; at that time, music still contains within it all of literature, and sung or half-sung poetry encompasses all the functions covered in our lives by libraries, encyclopaedias, mass media, mail and even the internet, providing entertainment, teaching and the news. Thus Achilles' instrument is far removed from standing for art for art's sake; it can be understood as the token attribute of a person of education and culture, someone we might today considered well-read. Montero-Honorato writes:

As we delineate the oldest concepts introduced to music by the Greeks, the first and greatest difficulty stems from the very terminological nature of those innovations and revolves around correctly understanding what the word *musike* means. Actually, the term covered quite a number of activities, all very different although merging into a single phenomenon (including not only poetry, but also dance and gymnastics). Thus the education of aristocracy would have assumed primarily practising the lyre, but also exercises in singing, poetry, dancing and sport.¹⁰⁹

Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate in source texts any definition of music that included sport, although *μουσική* does regularly come up *next to γυμναστική*, as an element of *paideia*, and in my opinion that is how we ought to understand Hermes' musical displays in the hymn. It is the poet introducing to the young audience an ideal of a grown up's *arete* without limiting it to Ajax-style strength, agility and physical courage. The character the listeners are to identify with is the god of eloquence and cunning (actually an ancestor of Odysseus), shown playing Apollo's instrument just like Achilles in Homer. A certain role reversal

¹⁰⁷I fully owe that observation to M. Montero-Honorato's (1988) paper. Cf. Ps.-Plut. *De mus.* 40.1145d–e. Plato (*Resp.* 3.402b–c) also as good as equates music and virtue: “we shall never be true musicians, either [...] until we are able to recognize the forms of soberness, courage, liberality, and high-mindedness...”

¹⁰⁸Cf. Pl. *Prot.* 326a–b (*καθαρίζειν*). Protagoras adds that listening to melic poetry accompanied on the lyre makes boys *εὐρυθμότεροι* and *εὐαρμωστότεροι*. In the *Republic*, on the other hand (3.399c–e), Socrates proposes removing harps (the *trigonon* and the *pektis*) and the aulos from the ideal state, leaving only the lyre and the cithara as appropriate for balanced, “educationally correct” pieces in the Doric and Phrygian harmonies.

¹⁰⁹Montero-Honorato 1988, 196. Cf. Pl. *Leg.* 2.654b: “So the well-educated man will be able both to sing and dance well.”

occurs here, however, possibly with purely humorous intentions: on the one hand, Hermes puts quite a lot of work into making the lyre, showing his foresight (*προμήθεια*: I think he knows in advance what he will need to win Apollo's favour) and considers it an achievement to brag about; on the other, ultimately he meekly surrenders the lyre to Apollo and acknowledges the latter's superiority when it comes to the art of music. That looks like the way a child might behave towards an adult, particularly a pupil towards a teacher, and we could accept that interpretation if it were not for the fact that while the *Hymn* does have in it a lyre lesson, it is with Hermes as the teacher and Apollo as pupil.¹¹⁰

To round this section off, I would like to return to the sympotic motifs briefly summoned above. The most significant of those is of course the lyre itself. While playing it, Hermes (v. 55–56) “sang sweet random snatches, even as youths bandy taunts at festivals.” His second, more serious song also evokes sympotic associations in Apollo, who says (v. 453–454): “I never cared for any of those feats of skill at young men's revels, as I do now for this” and proceeds to appoint the younger god a *δαῖτος ἐταῖρος*, *companion of the feast*.¹¹¹ Both of those excerpts mention young men who sing to the accompaniment of the lyre at the *fast* (*δαίς*), which must have made identifying with Hermes easier for the boys who knew the custom from experience. Besides, a feast sprinkled with music is not far from a symposium, a feast sprinkled with music and wine, which is a pre-eminently youth-oriented institution. Some of the songs performed during symposia were about heroic deeds of war, with the participants looking up to the ancient heroes as role models and cheering one another on in their race to adulthood.¹¹²

And so in his Homeric hymn, Hermes is a role model himself if a surprising and subversive one, as well as a tutor and teacher.¹¹³ Contrary to expectations, too, what he teaches is not so much thievery as courage and practical wit. I believe in this section I have managed to demonstrate that alongside those traits Maia's son tries to instil in young people respect for tradition and love of literature, so they know to honour not merely Ares, but also Apollo, Mnemosyne and the Muses, resulting in a more balanced reflection of the educational process of the time, and thus of Hermes Kurotrophos.

The *dais*, or feast, has come up in this paper repeatedly and is going to play an important part in the next section as well.

¹¹⁰ LI. 478–489. Cf. Kaimio 1974, 38–39; Podbielski 2005, 182.

¹¹¹ L. 436.

¹¹² That topic is elaborated on by Johnston (2002, 123–124). When writing of the educational function the symposium had for aristocratic youths, the author relies on the work of Oswyn Murray (e.g. Murray 1983, 195–199; non vidi). Cf. Bremmer 1994 (non vidi).

¹¹³ Interestingly, “on an Athenian lekythos made ca. 470 BCE, we see a boy reading a *Hymn to Hermes* (*H. Hom.* 18); according to experts that means by that time that hymn had become a school text” (*YMNOI OMHPHIKOI* 2001, 21 and note 32). Cf. Webster 1975, 86 (non vidi).

3. THE COMPANY OF GODS AND “MEN”

*Carrying ransom out of Troy,
Priam by you came guided.
Past enemy tents, past the proud sons
Of Atreus, past the Myrmidons!
Watch-fires, unseen he glided.*

Still, the educational message of the *Hymn to Hermes* may not be its only, or even its most important subject. The third section of this paper deals with that of Hermes exploits which has not made it onto the list of his *κλυτὰ ἔργα* (l. 16): slaughtering two of the fifty stolen cows on the bank of the Alpheus. I will attempt to show the narrative function of that episode, but also to throw light on its religious meaning.

3.1 FROM CYLLENE TO OLYMPUS

As I mention above in Section 1, all the major Homeric hymns can be seen as an epic elaboration on a single thought expressed in the *Theogony*:¹¹⁴ “the blessed gods [...] pressed far-seeing Olympian Zeus to reign and to rule over them [...] So he divided their dignities amongst them.” At the same time in Clay’s¹¹⁵ opinion the *Hymns* are *theological* poems, in the sense that they depict the gods. That characterisation process is partly static, achieved through epithets and genealogy, partly dynamic, narrative. The gods are shown in their respective hymns in critical moments: Demeter and Aphrodite just as their power is limited and subjected to the Olympian order; Apollo and Hermes, in the short period between birth and winning themselves full acceptance and a place in that order.¹¹⁶ In both cases the stories revolve around the *timai* of the deities: their *honours* or maybe rather honorary *functions*, since it is about their tasks. Indeed, sometimes the *timai* can be understood synonymously with the gods’ works or actions, their

¹¹⁴ *Th.* 881–885; cf. Clay 1989, 15.

¹¹⁵ Clay 1989, 7; Lengauer (1994, 19) also calls the *Hymn to Hermes* “theological.” Clay (1989, 9–11 and 268–270) believes the greatest achievement and possibly in part the objective of the authors of the *Homeric Hymns* was creating uniform literary characterizations of the gods, common to all of Greece, which may have made the task easier for itinerant rhapsodes by making their repertoire universally comprehensible. The overall message of the *Hymns*, at any rate, is pan-Hellenic, and any local references do not serve the interests of individual cult centres. It is worth remembering that according to Herodotus (2.53) it is from Homer and Hesiod that the Greeks knew “whence each of the gods came to be, or whether all had always been, and how they appeared in form.” It is likely that the historian meant some such process of standardizing beliefs, and it would be odd to assume he did not consider the *Hymns* to be by Homer.

¹¹⁶ Clay 1989, 267–270 and 155 note 7; Clay 1997, 499–500.

erga: ἔργα πολυχρόσου Ἀφροδίτης,¹¹⁷ that is flirting, courtship, seduction and sex, are also her *timai*.

Hermes' *timai*, which he obtains gradually in the *Hymn*, foreshadowed by the poet with relevant epithets up front, include cunning, shameless eloquence, thievery, shepherding, dreams, carrying divine messages (including those to Hades), and power over animals.¹¹⁸ He has to win them himself, relying on his wit and guile, but ultimately only Zeus can grant them to him (even though in his gratitude for the gift of the lyre, Apollo promises to help with that and to bring Hermes among the immortals¹¹⁹). Anyway, Hermes' efforts in obtaining *timai* show the little god's ambition. He clearly means to climb to the very top no matter the cost, will balk at nothing to reach his goals and subordinates all his actions in the hymn to them.¹²⁰

And so when the poet tells us (v. 20–22) that Hermes, “so soon as he had leaped from his mother's heavenly womb, he lay not long waiting in his holy cradle, but he sprang up and sought the oxen of Apollo”, only to go off on 40-line excursion on the lyre, that is not clumsiness, but a deliberate device. Both Hermes' raid and the invention of the lyre serve a single purpose: that of smuggling him to Olympus, and the word is indeed *smuggle*, because Maia's son gets there in an unusual way: he is captured and brought to judgement. One can guess that was his intention from the start, or why would he want Apollo's cows so badly? After all when Apollo reaches Maia's abode, on the slopes of Cyllene “many thin-shanked sheep were grazing on the grass” (v. 232: μῆλα, that is sheep or goats).

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the myth contains one episode which is particularly difficult to interpret: the slaughter of two cows on the Alpheus. Perhaps it will now become clearer in the light of Hermes' ulterior motives. I will quote that fairly long excerpt (v. 112–140) in full, since every word in it counts:¹²¹

Next he took many dried sticks and piled them thick and plenty in a sunken trench: and flame began to glow, spreading afar the blast of fierce-burning fire. [115] And while the strength of glorious Hephaestus was beginning to kindle the fire, he dragged out two lowing, horned cows

¹¹⁷ *H. Hom. Ven.* 1.

¹¹⁸ Ll. 3, 13–14, 28, 145, 155, 282, 392, 406, 413, 514, 551, and 567–573. Hermes' power over animals is presumably limited to copulation and fertility. Not that we can read that in the hymn, as part of Zeus' line on the subject is obscured by a lacuna, but that limited understanding of his functions better fits what we know about him from other sources; cf. v. 493–494 and *Th.* 444.

¹¹⁹ L. 461; or, “make him leader” among them. If in fact one ought to read ἡγεμονεύσω here, which is by no means certain.

¹²⁰ That attitude of uncompromising ambition can be seen as educationally appropriate as well. In the atmosphere of agonistic competition typical of games Hermes tells the young listener, “Climb higher! Do not wait for others to overtake you! Look at me: everything I have, I have achieved myself!”

¹²¹ I will try to convince the reader the ὀσίη κρεάων the god longed for in l. 130 is not exactly *sacrificial meat* and in fact could be understood as the precise opposite of that.

close to the fire; for great strength was with him. He threw them both panting upon their backs on the ground, and rolled them on their sides, bending their necks over, and pierced their vital chord. [120] Then he went on from task to task: first he cut up the rich, fatted meat, and pierced it with wooden spits, and roasted flesh and the honorable chine and the paunch full of dark blood all together. He laid them there upon the ground, and spread out the hides on a rugged rock: [125] and so they are still there many ages afterwards, a long, long time after all this, and are continually. Next glad-hearted Hermes dragged the rich meats he had prepared and put them on a smooth, flat stone, and divided them into twelve portions distributed by lot, making each portion wholly honorable. [130] Then glorious Hermes longed for the *sacrificial meat*, for the sweet savour wearied him, god though he was; nevertheless his proud heart was not prevailed upon to *devour the flesh*, although he greatly desired. But he put away in the high-roofed byre [135] the fat and all the flesh, placing them high up to be a token of his youthful theft. And after that he gathered dry sticks and utterly destroyed with fire all the hoofs and all the heads. And when the god had duly finished all, he threw his sandals into deep-eddying Alpheus, [140] and quenched the embers, covering the black ashes with sand...]

The usual attempts at interpreting the scene are aetiological and see it as a mythical prototype of sacrifice: to the Olympians in general, specifically to the twelve whose worship was widespread in Greece as such or even more specifically, for a local ritual related either to Olympia (since Hermes spent the night nearby) or to Athens (as the supposed location where the *Hymn* was created or first performed).¹²² That does in general look like the right track, but, as Clay¹²³ notes, finding a reference to ritual practice in the text does not absolve the reader from demanding narrative coherence. In other words, just spotting aetiology is not enough to justify the presence of any element in the story; the text still needs to hold water. And since the glue which makes the *Hymn to Hermes* stick and hold water is the young god's ambition, the episode on the Alpheus ought to serve it as well. But how?

Let us focus on the crucial part of the scene (v. 130–133). My only remarks regarding the translation quoted above would be that where it has “to devour the flesh”, the text seems to literally go “to push (sc. the meat) down his holy throat” (*περᾶν ἱερῆς κατὰ δειρῆς*, although the Greek is controversial to this day¹²⁴), and “sacrificial meat” was chosen as the equivalent of *όσίη κρέαων*, likewise an important expression.¹²⁵ Now that non-Homeric expression cannot mean any

¹²² Càssola (*Inni omerici* 1992, 526): “Olympian sacrifice” (apparently in the sense of *thysia* in general terms, since he points out that Hermes, as he believes, keeps the hides). Allen, Halliday and Sikes (*Homeric Hymns* 1936, 306) and West (*Homeric Hymns...* 2003, 13–14 and 123): more specifically “the Olympian worship of the twelve gods”; similarly Sowa 1984, 201. Burkert 1984, 839–840 and 2000, 157: the cult of the twelve in Olympia. Brown 1947, 102–122 (non vidi): the cult of the twelve in Athens; the latter found in Clay 1989, 118, note 80.

¹²³ Clay 1989, 118.

¹²⁴ *περῆν*’ (*Homeric Hymns* 1936); *περᾶν* (*Inni omerici* 1992 and *Homeric Hymns...* 2003); *ΥΜΝΟΙ ΟΜΗΡΙΚΟΙ* 2001: *περᾶν*’ (i.e. apparently *περᾶναι*, from *περαίνω*?)

¹²⁵ Lit. “the sacred (pious) part of the meat”, with the omitted noun being something along the lines of *μοῖρα*.

meat meant to be burnt as part of sacrifice to the gods or offered them in any other way. Quite the contrary, *όσίη κρεάων* is actually the de-consecrated (or never sacrificed in the first place) meat meant for human consumption.¹²⁶ That interpretation rests on an opposition that is fundamental to Greek religion: that between the adjectives *ιερός* (*holy, belonging to a god, filled with divine power*) and *όσιος* (*sacred, consistent with divine laws, prescribed or assigned to mortals by divine laws*). When contrasted with *ιερός* (*set aside for the gods*), *όσιος* begins to additionally connote *not set aside for the gods, allowed for humans, secular*. Thus the Latin equivalents of the latter adjective are both *fas* and *profanus*.¹²⁷

The unexpected and unusual reference to Hermes' throat as *holy* or *divine* (*ιερός*) can only serve to create such contrast. On the Alpheus, a god tries to act like a mortal, i. e. to roast and eat meat. It is a test: he wants to see if it is even possible, and discovers it is in fact not. He *fails* in spite of the great hunger he has been suffering from since noon.¹²⁸ Of course, that hunger is not divine at all; if not beastly, it is human at best. Accordingly, Clay¹²⁹ suggests the following interpretation: Hermes is born far from the gods, in a mountain cave in the middle of nowhere. His mother is a modest nymph,¹³⁰ of his father he has hearsay only. No wonder he is uncertain of his standing: is he one of the mortals (who live on meat), or immortals (whose food is ambrosia)? Is there room for him in that new Olympian order, or is there not?

Her interpretation is confirmed by the way Hermes and Apollo behave in the final passages of the *Hymn*, where, reconciled for now, they return to the crime scene so Hermes can give Apollo's cows back (v. 401 sqq.) The younger brother is just leading the animals out of the cave when Apollo spots the two hides stretched nearby. Astonished at the toddler's strength and angry with him for removing those two cows from the herd, he seems to try to bind the culprit with withes, but those, obedient to Hermes' will, take root instead.¹³¹ That is followed by v. 414–417:

¹²⁶ Bruit-Zaidman and Schmitt-Pantel 1999, 9; Clay 1989, 121.

¹²⁷ *LSJ*, s.v. *όσιος*.

¹²⁸ L. 64: *κρειτών έρατίζων*, which in the *Iliad* (11.551 and 17.660) refers to a lion hunting.

¹²⁹ Clay 1989: 102–105 and 111–112.

¹³⁰ *Α πότνια* of a “heavenly womb” (v. 19–20), but not Hera, Leto or another “real goddess” either. Hermes' close cousin Dardanus, son of Zeus and Maia's sister Electra, was mortal.

¹³¹ “So saying, Apollo twisted strong withes with his hands” (l. 409). The text does not specify what he twisted the withes *around*, and as a result editors like to see a lacuna after that line. Allen, Halliday and Sikes (*Homeric Hymns* 1936, 300) suppose it was the cows that were bound, as does Richardson (2010). Appel in *YMNOI OMHPIKOI* 2001 assumes a different valency for *περιστρέφω* and translates “tied the hides with the withes.” Càssola (*Inni omerici* 1992, 535) does without a lacuna even though the genders do not match. He is not happy with any of the proposed solutions, but considers it most likely that Apollo was trying to bind Hermes. West (*Homeric Hymns...* 2003) avoids the problem altogether by translating “he began to weave strong binds” (but still, binds meant for Hermes, surely?) At any rate, one is reminded of the scene in the *Hymn*

τότε δὴ κρατὺς Ἀργεΐφόντης
 χῶρον ὑποβλήδην ἐσκέψατο πῦρ ἀμαρύσσων

ἐγκρύψαι μεμαῶς Λητοῦς δ' ἐρικυδέος υἱόν
 ῥεῖα μάλ' ἐπρήυνεν...

Editors sometimes placing another lacuna between lines 415 and 416 because of the expression πῦρ ἀμαρύσσων (“flashing with fire”), which has a good analogue in the *Theogony*,¹³² where it refers to Typhoeus’ fiery gaze. The translation then is “Then the strong slayer of Argus looked furtively upon the ground with eyes flashing fire ... desiring to hide ... [presumably the slaughter of those two cows or some such thing¹³³]; and very easily he softened the son of all-glorious Leto...” (sc. by showing him the lyre, which he had clearly brought with him for just such a purpose).

Clay,¹³⁴ on the other hand, proposes in v. 415 πῦρ ἀμαρύσσων (an emendation accepted by Càssola as well) and translates the passage quite literally with no lacuna arguing that one should not be in too much haste to compare Hermes to monstrous Typhoeus with actual flames blazing from his eyes. The translation then runs, “Then the strong slayer of Argus looked upon the ground, saw flickering fire out of the corner of his eye, and desired to hide it; and very easily he soothed the son of all-glorious Leto...” (that is, distracted him with the same lyre). What fire though? Not the glare of anybody’s eyes, but rather what is left of the fire he built the previous night to roast the meat, still smouldering. Of course he tried to put it out, scattering the embers or pouring sand on them (v. 140); apparently he was only partly successful and there is still a flame in there. Only why would he be so desperate to hide the fire?

It is by then too late to cover up last night’s slaughter, let alone the theft: Apollo has already noticed the cowhides stretched on the rock and commented on Hermes great strength he can glean from them. So the fuss is all about the fire itself and what it was for:

to *Dionysus* (12–13 and 39–42), where the pirates try and fail to bind the god, who in turn makes vines and ivy twine around the mast and sail.

¹³² *Th.* 826–827: ἐν δὲ οἱ ὅσσε θεσπεσίης κεφαλῆσι ὑπ’ ὀφρῶσι πῦρ ἀμαρύσσεν. Certainly in the *Hymn to Hermes* itself, ἀμαρύσσω and ἀμαρυνγή can also bring to mind eyes twinkling as they move: cf. ὀφθαλμῶν ἀμαρυνγαί (l. 45) and βλεφάρων ἀμαρύσσων (l. 278). Still, it does not follow that the author could not use the same verb to refer to anything else!

¹³³ Although Càssola (*Inni omerici* 1992), to quote one example, translates “trying to hide the flashing flames of his gaze.” Allen, Halliday and Sikes (*Homeric Hymns* 1936, 332) believe the only thing that *could* be hidden was the meat placed by Hermes in the cave (σῆμα νεῆς φορηῆς, l. 136). Appel in *YMNOI OMHPIKOI* (2001, 341), on the other hand, thinks perhaps it was Apollo wishing to hide his interest in the lyre, or else Hermes trying to hide it under his diapers.

¹³⁴ Clay 1989, 137; *Inni omerici* 1992, 536. The decisive piece of information is that a transitive use of ἀμαρύσσω occurs only as late as Quintus Smyrnaeus.

If the hides have proven Hermes' so-far unexpected strength, the remnants of the fire point to an event that could greatly embarrass the young god, indicating as they do that he was not sure of his divinity at the time. Since then, Hermes has been admitted to Olympus; now all he wants is to win the *timai* that are the necessary accessories of a full member of the community of the gods. He must at all cost conceal from Apollo any evidence that he was previously unaware of his actual condition, roasting the flesh of the slaughtered cows and trying to eat it.¹³⁵

Thus both the scenes on the Alpheus (v. 112–140 and 401–502) indicate clearly that at the start of it all, Hermes was not sure of his divine nature,¹³⁶ and his first step was to prove to himself that he was not mortal. The proof is a form of the reduction to the absurd, requiring him to make the working assumption that he is, in fact, a mortal child; no wonder we can see in his mysterious actions a prototype for our human ones.

3.2 HERMES THE HOST AND HERMES THE GUEST

The fact the meat gets divided into twelve portions does suggest a connection to the twelve Olympians¹³⁷ and perhaps some sort of sacrifice to them. Still, knowing that the myth is aetiological is not enough grounds to assume that what Hermes does on the Alpheus is the prototype of sacrifice in general; it could be about some other ritual practice. The most typical Greek sacrifice, *thysia*, appears in literature almost unchanged in form from Homer¹³⁸ till the end of paganism. We are familiar with the process in some detail, because alongside texts, it is attested to in iconography and the remains of actual sacrifices. I will now try to confront the several stages of the sacrificial ritual with what Hermes does with his two cows.¹³⁹

First of all he does not erect an altar; he made his fire *κατουδαίω ἐνὶ βόθρῳ*, in a sunken trench, something regularly found in rituals in honour of the dead and the gods of the underworld, not the “Olympian rite” *thysia* is.¹⁴⁰ Next he not

¹³⁵ Clay 1989, 137–138. Richardson (2010) knows Clay's work but does not discuss it despite the difficulties he admits experiencing with the scene of slaughter and feast, Hermes' hunger and his later desire to conceal something (?) from Apollo.

¹³⁶ As mentioned in section 2, Hermes' uncertainty and ambivalent feelings reflect the uncertainty and ambiguity of adolescence. Here the two interpretations, educational-pedagogical (section 2) and theological-aetiological (section 3) come the closest to each other.

¹³⁷ Johnson (2002, 125–126) very convincingly demonstrates it could all be, not about the twelve deities known universally from literature (*τὸ δωδεκάθεον*), but rather about another twelve, worshipped in Olympia. Interestingly, Hermes shared an altar with Apollo there.

¹³⁸ E.g. *Il.* 1.447–474; 2.402–431; 7.313–322; *Od.* 3.417–472; 17.241.

¹³⁹ *Thysia* is discussed in detail (with minor differences) by Bruit-Zaidman and Schmitt-Pantel (1999, 27–36, 227), Burkert (2000, 55–59) and Lengauer (1994, 80).

¹⁴⁰ Cf. *Od.* 11.25 and 11.36. Not that that means Hermes tries to honour the twelve Olympians with a chthonic ritual, totally inappropriate for them; after all, he does not pour blood into the

so much *led* two cows near the fire as *dragged* them (ἔλκε), and that while they were *lowing* and *panting*. Now that is not the behaviour of the sacrificer and the victim; the animal (which is *hieron*) goes to its death calmly and symbolically consents by nodding its head. (For that purpose it is sprinkled with water and barley; or it might be given water to drink or grain to eat.) Hermes omits that part completely and neither does he offer the first-fruits by burning some hairs. Next, the god kills two cows by throwing them to the ground and piercing their spines (δι' αἰῶνας τετορήσας), which is quite far from the typical ritual slicing of the victim's throat after stunning it with a blow of an axe or club. At that point, the victim's head would be pulled back to make the blood spurt onto the altar or into a vessel from which it would later be poured onto the altar; the hymn contains no trace of those actions either. After that, Hermes quarters the cows and proceeds to roast the meat, but of course if this were to be a sacrifice, it would be too early for any quartering and cooking, as before the animal was quartered, two things needed to be cut out of it: the sacrifice proper, or the part intended for burning (thigh bones wrapped in fat, whole hind legs or pieces of raw meat wrapped in fat), and the *splanchna* (anterior internal organs, especially the heart and the liver¹⁴¹) to be roasted separately right after the sacrifice and eaten in order to emphasize the community of the participants in the ritual. Hermes, on the other hand, explicitly roasts all those things "all together" (ὅμοῦ), and the only viscera he puts aside are the intestines (χολάδες, which is a synonym for ἔντερα). It is only after the participants did their duty to the gods (something Hermes shows no interest in) that the victim was quartered and its meat spitted and cooked. It is this roast meat that was the *hosie kreaon*, the part decidedly meant for the humans, not for the gods. It would be divided into equal parts (as to weight at least), and to stress the equality it might be distributed among the participants by lot. Then the little god "added a perfect γέρας to each [portion]" ("making each portion wholly honorable"). That is an extraordinary detail, because *geras*, the *part of honour*, would normally be granted by the host or the official supervising the sacrifice to one person only, namely someone he wanted to distinguish the most. But Hermes is alone and has nobody there to share his meal with; or has he invited guests but they have not come? And why would he want to honour all twelve¹⁴² of them equally, and still specially?

The above comparison shows clearly that whatever Hermes does on the Alpheus, it is not the "true" sacrifice, or *thysia*. Rather, it seems he omits

trench, he lights a fire in it. Rather, βόθρος is a synonym for ἐσχάρα here, a word whose meaning is close to that of ἐστία: "a hearth dug in the ground" (cf. Burkert 1984, 837). Our associations should be culinary, then, as much as cultic.

¹⁴¹Burkert 2000, 56; Lat. *exta*. Bruit-Zaidman and Schmitt-Pantel (1999, 35) claim that simultaneously, *entera* were cut out, meant for a kind of head cheese. That is what Hermes did, although there is nothing to suggest those hind internal organs were then ritually consumed.

¹⁴²Or eleven, since he presumably included himself among the twelve.

from the pattern of *thysia* precisely those elements which make it strictly religious, especially the sacrifice proper, concentrating instead on its secular, gastronomical aspect. Thus his goal is not *thysia* but a feast, *dais*,¹⁴³ which may be a natural extension of the sacrificial ritual or occur on its own, as it does here, preserving some but not all ritual connotations.¹⁴⁴ He plans his feast for twelve too, so I suppose he does mean the twelve gods; who else could it be? Still, if assumption was from the beginning that gods do not eat meat, which seemed just clear a moment ago, how can he now count on them coming? I think that as we search for an answer to this, we must remember one thing: Hermes does all that from the position of a human, not a god.¹⁴⁵ And in that case: when, under what circumstances, can a mortal human being invite the gods to a meal, and why?

Alas, the simplest answer is: “Never and under no circumstances.” The alimentary discrepancy between gods and humans, the fact the gods eat other things and do not share the table with us, is fundamental to Greek religion. That is exactly what is expressed by *thysia*, which I have just outlined, and in particular by the Hesiodic myth of its origins.¹⁴⁶ Still, there are exceptions to that rule, and some early ones can already be found in the *Odyssey*. Namely, we see the swineherd Eumaeus entertaining a guest—the beggar whose tatters actually hide Odysseus—with the best of what his modest household has to offer.¹⁴⁷ For supper, he told the farmhands to pick a fat five years old pig, but also “did not forget the deathless gods” and began the feast with a sacrifice. That, too, was *thysia*, although of a pig rather than a cow, which might explain certain deviations from the pattern. The swineherd began by burning a fistful of the animal’s hair and praying. The, “he raised his right arm and struck with the oaken log he had left unchopped, and the pig gave up his soul.” There is nothing there about slitting the pig’s throat or about any *splanchna*, possibly

¹⁴³ The noun *δαίς*, *δαῖτός* („feast, esp. religious or sacrificial”, Lat. *daps*) comes from the same root *dāi* as the verb *δαίωμαι* (“to divide”), so originally it must have meant “division, cut” (i. e., of meat or possibly some other food). Cf. Frisk 1960, 341 and Chantraine 1968, 247. The “just feast” mentioned numerous times in Homer, *δαίς ἕϊση*, means exactly “equal division.” (*Il.* 1.468, repeated many times, and outside that formula 9.225; 15.95; 15,729; 24.69; *Od.* only 8.98; 16.479; 19.425; in the *Odyssey* the adjective is usually used of ships.)

¹⁴⁴ Burkert (1983, 105) believes that every meat-based meal, in myth at any rate, must follow the pattern of *thysia*. Vernant (1998, 66) goes even further, as in his opinion “Greeks only ever ate meat when sacrificing.”

¹⁴⁵ We are left with the inconsistency, where on the one hand, not eating meat seems to indicate to Hermes (and his poet) that a person is a god, and on the other, Maia’s son seems to count on the gods helping themselves. Perhaps that inconsistency is merely an illusion; I shall return to it in a moment by writing on Greek food offerings.

¹⁴⁶ *Th.* 535–557. Cf. e.g. Kerényi 2000, 84; Vernant 1998, 68–74. Below I shall return to this story as well.

¹⁴⁷ *Od.* 14, 418–456. Eumaeus’ sacrifice is analyzed in detail by Kadletz (1984), whose article I am drawing on here.

because of the species. However, the pig *was* quartered and eviscerated, and Eumaeus did carry out a proper sacrifice (*ὀμοθετεῖτο*): “he cut chunks of meat from all the limbs, wrapped them in fat and threw in the fire.” The remaining part of the meat, which corresponds to our *hosie kreaon* above, was roasted, placed on kitchen tables and divided into seven portions. One of those Eumaeus then offered (*θῆκεν*, *laid*) with a prayer “for the nymphs and Hermes, son of Maia.” In other words, those deities were honoured separately from the others and received not bones, fat or raw meat thrown into the flames, but some roast: the same thing that was cooked for human consumption. Additionally, although that is only a guess of mine, the verb *θῆκεν* implies their meat was placed on the table and left there for the duration of the meal, as if the deities had been themselves present at it. Now that resembles the Classical Period custom of *apyra* and *trapezomata*, which were put on tables in sanctuaries.¹⁴⁸ It is hard to say what Eumaeus would later do with that consecrated meat; he might have carried it to a nymph cave nearby or laid it under the nearest herm,¹⁴⁹ where any passer-by or beggar such as Odysseus could have found it and thanked the gods for the unexpected *hermaion*.

Somewhere on the fringes of the Greek religion there was the option of giving a god the gift of a normal human meal, or even of inviting them to dinner. In modest household cult it might even have been the rule: the contact with the divine needed to be upheld, but how often could a poor farmer afford to slaughter as much as a goat? Unlike *thysia*, offerings of this kind emphasized the closeness of the divine, rather than the distance (or at any rate expressed the desire for the distance to shorten), so they were the most appropriate in the worship of nymphs, Pan or any heroes buried in the vicinity: the deities one could afford to treat with some familiarity, because one encountered them daily at springs and cross-roads.¹⁵⁰ Eumaeus’ offering demonstrates that Hermes was also counted among those gods the nearest humanity. No wonder to start with he was not even sure if he was a god! After all, the same could be said of nymphs.

Naturally we should not expect that the Greeks visiting a *temenos* to leave *trapezomata* there often had the opportunity to see a god descend in person to taste them, just as the Romans at the *lectisternia* were unlikely to actually see the statues lift food and cups to their lips. Apparently they did not mind; they were able to see that part of the ritual figuratively and consider the offering made and

¹⁴⁸ Bruit-Zaidman and Schmitt-Pantel 1999, 38 and 51.

¹⁴⁹ As suggested by Kadletz (1984, 103). The practice of placing offerings at the foot of a herm also comes up in Kerényi (1993, 22). Another possibility is the Ithacan altar to the nymphs, “where all passers-by made offerings” (*Od.* 17.211).

¹⁵⁰ Clay (1989, 125–126, notes 102 and 103) lists examples of food offerings given to such deities (also the Dioscuri, Hecate and Zeus Philios) and concludes that the common denominator could be exactly familiarity. Cf. Burkert 2000, 107.

accepted even though it was still on the table.¹⁵¹ Perhaps, then, Hermes' guests did come. Perhaps this part of his actions was successful and he did manage to treat the gods to some beef.

What for? And why did he choose to do that via a shared meal rather than a typical sacrifice? Well, exactly because a *thysia* would only stress the gap between him and the Olympians, whereas he wanted to join them as an *ultimus inter pares*, initiating an equal relationship of the type expressed by commensality. Likewise the twelve extra portions of honour served to support symbolic claim of "We are all of us the best, none of us more equal than another." Wishful thinking, really, since Apollo never stopped giving voice to his superiority to the younger brother until the very end of the Hymn, and nothing can shake Zeus' leading position as depicted in all the longer *Homeric Hymns*. Maybe Hermes' theogonic song mentioned above, in which he listed the gods "according to seniority" (ll. 427–433) expressed among other things acceptance of Olympian hierarchy, which does rest on the notion that some are definitely more equal than others.

And so, an aetiological interpretation of this passage is quite justified, but the ritual practice prototyped in it is not *thysia*, but rather two other institutions, also very important: first, a cooked food offering (possibly including the *trapezoma*), and second, the feast (*dais*) itself, including both sacred and secular feasting. What the food offering and the *dais*, both instituted by Hermes here, have in common, is commensality, the community of sharing a table or a meal: precisely the element missing from *thysia*. Thus it makes sense to expect that the myth told in the *Hymn to Hermes* will only snap into still better focus if we contrast it with another origin story on sacrifice, and one of the oldest Greek myths. Therefore let Hermes stand next to Prometheus...

3.3 ON THE ALPHEUS AND IN MECONE

For when the gods and mortal men had a dispute at Mecone, even then Prometheus was forward to cut up a great ox and set portions before them, trying to deceive the mind of Zeus. Before the rest he set flesh and inner parts thick with fat upon the hide, covering them with an ox paunch; [540] but for Zeus he put the white bones dressed up with cunning art and covered with shining fat. Then the father of men and of gods said to him: "Son of Iapetus, most glorious of all lords, good sir, how unfairly you have divided the portions!" – that is what it looks like in Hesiod.¹⁵² Clearly Prometheus, a friend and benefactor of humanity,

¹⁵¹Therefore I suspect that the introduction of food offerings not only involved a more intimate attitude to a god (regardless of the actual cause-and-effect relationship at play), but also came with or after the degree of abstraction in religious thinking which let worshippers believe the god invited to the table will in fact eat, but not *literally*. Taken literally, rituals of this kind make no sense.

¹⁵²*Th.* 535–544. It is probably worth noting the verb *ἐκρίνοντο* ("had a dispute"; "were judged") can also be rendered "were divided, underwent division, divided themselves."

made a right mess of things here. He paid a terrible price for his deed, but the uneven division would remain in force (*Th.* 556–557): “and because of this the tribes of men upon earth burn white bones to the deathless gods upon fragrant altars.”

The scene is usually¹⁵³ interpreted as follows: there was in fact conflict of some sort between gods and mortals, presumably surrounding the apportionment of slaughtered animals, although it is impossible to exclude other points of contention. Judgement in the dispute was entrusted to Prometheus, who protected humanity’s interests and saw to it that it would not starve by assigning it the part that looked unappetizing but was in fact edible and to the gods leaving the rest. It is clearly the mythical prototype of *thysia* and as it is only *since then* (*ἐκ τοῦ*; translated “because of this” above), things must have been different before. “Cutting up” a slaughtered (but as yet uncooked) animal may have suggested preparations for a feast, and we know from elsewhere¹⁵⁴ gods and mortals used to eat together: “For common, then, were the banquets, common the seats of deathless gods and mortal men.”

Prometheus’ deed might then be understood as trying to salvage the situation after that idyllic commensality stopped applying. West¹⁵⁵ notes that it is not Prometheus but Zeus (deceived) who ultimately made the choice. Therefore he takes the somewhat vague *τῷ μὲν...*, *τῷ δ’...* (“to the one side / group / party ..., and to the other ...”, not quite so in the above translation) to mean the Titan placed before the king of the gods the ugly yet edible portion, setting out to trap him (not *hic... illic...*, but *illic... hic...*).¹⁵⁶

The myth remains unclear, probably because Hesiod recounts it elliptically, selecting from a story common and well-known in his times only what he wants to stress. There is for example something unsettling about the lines 550–552: “But Zeus, whose wisdom is everlasting, saw and failed not to perceive the trick, and in his heart he thought mischief against mortal men which also was to be fulfilled.” If he “saw the trick”, why did he keep on playing the game?¹⁵⁷ Out of hostility towards humans? Is that how one should understand that “in his heart he thought mischief against mortal men”? How hard that is to believe in a poet so involved in the theodicy of the Olympian order, with Zeus as a champion of justice and a defender of the weak from the strong.¹⁵⁸ More importantly, if he

¹⁵³ E.g. Lengauer 1994, 79; Bruit-Zaidman and Schmitt-Pantel 1999, 166–167.

¹⁵⁴ Hes. fr. 1.6–7.

¹⁵⁵ West 1961, 137–138.

¹⁵⁶ I omit altogether the question of the actual declensional form of the pronouns and any possible emendations to *τῇ μὲν...*, *τῇ δ’...*, *τῷ μὲν...*, *τοῖς δ’...* etc.

¹⁵⁷ Clay (1984, 37) calls the battle of wits waged here between Zeus and Prometheus, a “divine comedy.”

¹⁵⁸ *κακὰ ὄσσετο θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποισι* does not *have* to mean “he contemplated how to make life harder for humans”; just as well (better, perhaps) is a translation along the lines of “he dwelt on

saw the trick, why did he act as if deceived and chose the worse portion? West¹⁵⁹ believes the words *γνώ ρ' οὐδ' ἠγνοίησε* in v. 551 to be a later insertion by a poet who sought to rescue Zeus' omniscience and prestige at the cost of the text's coherence.

Even so, the place can be interpreted without casting any such suspicions on Hesiod's text. I shall here draw heavily on the work of E. Wirshbo,¹⁶⁰ who observes, firstly, that *ὁ μὲν... ὁ δὲ...* can mean *ille... hic* just as well as *hic... ille...* (including in Homer and Hesiod), and secondly, that an indefinite use of that construction is common, where not only is it impossible to determine which pronoun goes with which referent, but it would make little sense to try. Here is his interpretation:

Zeus is not outraged that Prometheus offended him in his desire to help humanity, serving to him and to the other gods the portion which seemed worse; if gods had been accustomed to receiving the better portions at feasts, Zeus would have reached for the tasty looking one without making any remarks, since both were for the taking and neither had been assigned to any specific participant. No; what Zeus responds with outrage to is the very inequality of the division, unprecedented and violating the golden age standard of gods and men being equal. Prometheus' bias lies not in favouring humanity, but rather in introducing the new element of inequality into a harmonious world where no sharp divisions exist as yet. His goal is to disrupt the established balance of a feast where all participants are equal.¹⁶¹

How very much like Hermes in the *Hymn* this Hesiodean Prometheus is, and then how unlike him too. Like him, because he is *wily* (*ἀγκυλομήτης*) and ingenious (*ποικίλος*, *αἰολόμητις*, and *ποικιλόβουλος*) and because he “he said, thinking trickery” (*φῆ ῥα δολοφρονέων*) and “smiling softly, did not forget his cunning trick” (*ἦκ' ἐπιμειδήσας, δολίης δ' οὐ λήθετο τέχνης*).¹⁶² Like Hermes, too, in his unconcerned, amoral arbitrariness, as if he had the ability to foresee future events (*προμήθεια*) yet cared nothing for their consequences.¹⁶³ And unlike him, because his results were completely opposite to what Hermes achieves in the

the misery that would befall humans.” Naturally not everything can be explained away; Zeus is still responsible for depriving humankind of fire and saddling it with the worst of all plagues that is apparently the woman.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Hesiod. *Theogony and Works and Days* 1988, 321. In a slightly modified form (*γνώ δ' οὐδ' ἠγνοίησε*), the formula features also in the *Hymn to Hermes* (v. 243), where it refers to Apollo recognizing Hermes.

¹⁶⁰ Wirshbo 1982: 104–106; cf. *LSJ* s. v. *ὁ, ἡ, τό* A. VI.

¹⁶¹ Wirshbo 1982: 109–110.

¹⁶² *Th.* 546, 511, 521, 550, and 547. All those terms could well be applied to Hermes, which is exactly what the poet does; cf. v. 13, 76, 155, 282, 405, and 514 (*πολύτροπος, ποικιλομήτης, δολομήτης, δολίης δ' οὐ λήθετο τέχνης*).

¹⁶³ That does not preclude Prometheus' role as the champion and friend of humanity, even in Hesiod (as it is only in Aeschylus that it becomes clear). Still, it is possible we ought to see it through the prism of some whimsicality; Prometheus sides with humans against Zeus not so much out of any *love* for them, as out of his inborn defiant rebelliousness. Cf. Wirshbo 1982.

hymn. Because of his actions, Prometheus not only finds himself an outcast from the community of gods, but also puts an end to the shared divine-and-human society the golden generation enjoyed.¹⁶⁴ Hermes, on the contrary, joins the community of the gods, doing all he can to restore that old commensality at least in part.

Commensality is basically a sign of being part of the same community, as proven by the fact the gods no longer take part in men's feasts directly; instead, they do so at a distance and indirectly. They "feast on hecatombs" (*Il.* 9.535 by means of an altar on which offerings of wine and fat are made, but they are no longer entertained by humans the way it used to be before Prometheus intervened.¹⁶⁵

Thus in myth commensality with gods is only the lot of those especially honoured, who dwell on a faraway island or in some equally remote past. Such was the case of Tantalus, who squandered his privilege by committing a crime against the divine law.¹⁶⁶ Pausanias (8.2.4) has a similar explanation for the severity of the punishment meted out to Lycaeus, another evildoer who had at some point had the great fortune of entertaining immortals as his guests: "For in that remote past, men used to be the guests of gods and feast with them because of their honesty and piety. (That is to say, moral standards were higher in that era and Lycaeus happened to stand out remarkably, for the worse of course. His crime was actually similar to that of Tantalus.) And this is what Alcinous, the king of the blessed Phaeacians has to say of the gods:¹⁶⁷ "for ever heretofore have they been wont to appear to us in manifest form, when we sacrifice to them glorious hecatombs, and they feast among us, sitting even where we sit [...] for we are of near kin to them, as are the Cyclopes and the wild tribes of the Giants."

On those two occasions, on Alpheus and in Mecone, both Hermes and Prometheus revealed an important character trait of theirs. It may be the Titan's actions caused humanity more ill than good, and one could claim Hermes turned out to be a much better friend to humankind than Prometheus, but I do not think the difference results from their different attitudes to our species. Rather, both gods seem to have done what they are absolutely the best at: they to have made a mess of things. Then it just *so happened* that in the process one of them helped humankind, and the other, not so much, but that was not because of any good or

¹⁶⁴ One may think Prometheus actually confirmed or sanctioned that new division between mortals and immortals, or saw to it that the division, since it had already taken place, be as painless for humanity as possible, but Wirshbo's opinion on the subject is shared by Clay (1984, 37) and by Vernant (1974; non vidi) whom she cites in support of that claim.

¹⁶⁵ Saïd 1979, 17–18 (non vidi). Found in: Clay 1989, 119–120.

¹⁶⁶ Either by killing his own son and serving him to the gods for them to eat, or else by stealing nectar and ambrosia from them; cf. Hubbard 1997, 3–5.

¹⁶⁷ *Od.* 7.201–206.

ill will, but because of their unpredictable, defiant, subversive and thus creative nature.

One great virtue of Wirshbo's paper quoted above is that it refrains from modifying the text of *Theogony* as transmitted through the tradition; if we take the apportioning of the ox as he does, we need neither emendate τῶ μὲν... τῶ δὲ... nor remove the line in which Zeus "saw and failed not to perceive the trick." If it has a fault then I suppose it lies in emphasizing we ought to fundamentally change our opinion of Prometheus in Hesiod and see him as a clever, dishonest but reckless trickster *rather than* a great inventor, civilizing force and protector of humanity or, in other words, a culture hero.¹⁶⁸

Yes, as one reads Hesiod, it is a good thing to remember this Archaic Prometheus is not yet the creator of humanity,¹⁶⁹ and is quite far from the deeply tragic Prometheus of Aeschylus; still, already in the *Theogony* the Titan is the bringer of fire, and his character does not seem inconsistent with the culture hero type, the sower of civilization: after all, we can suspect the author does not tell us everything, selecting some bits and rejecting others. For those reasons I would like to highlight the idea that in gods and heroes invention and culture sowing are not, in fact, in opposition to trickery; it is quite the other way round. It is precisely excess cleverness and untapped creative energy that bring about Hermes' inventions: the lyre, lighting fire with two sticks (and according to v. 111 fire itself as well, which is another similarity to Prometheus), the peculiar sandals which made such strange tracks, and the syrinx. A trickster is somebody who cannot sit still; if there happens to be some gain in that for civilization, that is nothing but a pleasant side effect. Hermes demonstrates that with blinding clarity, and the many other similarities between the two gods let us guess that before Aeschylus, that was close to how the ancients saw Prometheus, too.¹⁷⁰ On

¹⁶⁸ Wirshbo 1982, 108, 110. Casting Hermes as a Trickster is much less controversial; cf. e. g. Burkert 2000, 156–159.

¹⁶⁹ He is not yet that in Aeschylus either. S. Srebrny (in Aeschylus. *Tragedie* 2005, 163 note) writes that "the earliest mention of Prometheus as the creator of humanity that we possess comes from the 4th century BCE", but I haven't been able to hunt it down. All I have is the mentions in Pausanias (10.4.5) and Pseudo-Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 1.7.1). On the other hand—is civilizing humanity (or, differentiating it from the beasts) symbolically creating it? Is not separating it from the race of gods the same? Especially in the context of the alimentary indicators of human condition as different from both animal and divine, which Vernant emphasizes so.

¹⁷⁰ Kerényi 2000, 93–94; Sowa 1984, 157, 198–211. Greene (2005, 343–344) stresses that both Hermes and Prometheus are descended from the rebel Titan Iapetus. Moreover both gods share the epithet ἀκάκητα (*Il.* 16.185; *Od.* 24.10; *Th.* 614), although it is by no means clear if it should be understood as synonymous with the adjective ἄκακος, "kind, good." West (in Hesiod: *Theogony and Works and Days* 1988, 336) believes the meaning of the word is simply not known. And even if ἀκάκητα does mean ἄκακος, let us not forget such epithets of gods are sometimes euphemistic. (E.g. Zeus *Meilichius*, "kindly", is a chthonic god who was worshipped as a snake and offered propitiatory sacrifices. The names *Kore* and *Pluton* are likewise euphemisms and essentially epithets; it was better not to utter the real names of those deities.) Sowa (1984, 157 and 201) also

another occasion the same trickster can be counted on to make lots and lots of mischief and not feel guilty for a minute.

But then, we have been warned; as the *Hymn to Hermes* (v. 576–578) puts it, (my translation for once) “he keeps company with all sorts of mortals and immortals: sometimes he helps, but most often deceives the tribes of mortals all night long.” The first part aptly summarizes the nature of this god as an intermediary or go-between, close to gods and humans alike and sharing in the qualities of both races. The rest reminds the audience that Hermes can be worshipped and even made friends with, but never trusted. And they could both apply to Prometheus just as well.¹⁷¹

CONCLUSION

*You also, golden staff in hand,
Shepherd the good souls' ghostly band
To the Elysian bowers,
Great Mercury, accorded love
Equally by the gods above
And the infernal powers.*

I hope I was able in this paper to show the myth told in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* and its protagonist in a slightly different way than it is usually done. Hermes proved not merely a clever thief (although without that he would not have been himself), but also, unexpectedly, an educator: an inventor of things useful to humanity (in sections 1 and 3), a teacher (section 2), and last but not least (in section 3 again) an originator of two important social institutions: the food offering, which brings humans closer to the gods, and the “fair feast”, which just brings people together. Needless to say, none of those perspectives is new; it is my hope that each time I managed to point the reader to all my sources.

equates *tricksters* and *culture heroes*. By writing about the inventiveness of tricksters (and not just gods, since Palamedes is a hero of this type as well, and perhaps so is Daedalus) I do not mean to claim that there are no other inventors or civilizers; one of the greatest civilizing achievements of Greek myth, agriculture, comes from a goddess who has very clear moral aspects: Demeter. Two other great civilization founders, Athena and Hephaestus, look nothing like *tricksters* either (cf. *H. Hom.* 20, although actually Hephaestus has been mentioned, alongside Hermes and Prometheus, as one of the Cabiri).

¹⁷¹Prometheus' humanity is discussed, among other writers, by Kerényi (2000, 94), and while he believes it an important distinction between the “human” Prometheus and completely “inhuman” Hermes, I think I have managed to demonstrate Hermes' close ties to humanity well enough above. Cf. *Il.* 24.334–335, where Zeus says, “Hermes, seeing thou lovest above all others to companion a man, and thou givest ear to whomsoever thou art minded up...” This “whomsoever thou art minded up” (ὅ κ' ἐθέλησθα) suggests whimsicality or arbitrariness similar to those in lines 577–578 of the *Hymn* quoted above.

As I mention above in the Introduction, I believe teaching and education are the common denominator of all these various aspects of the myth. The poet certainly wants to amuse, that seems to me to be beyond any doubt, but apparently also to teach. In a figurative but compelling way he tells young people—young men, actually—how they should enter their adult lives, all the while painting a portrait of Hermes as a tutor and teacher, in particular, a teacher of humanity which owes its civilized state in part to him, although that theological depiction can easily be meant for a wider audience.

I think I succeeded at least to an extent in supporting the idea, perhaps slightly surprising, that the *Hymn to Hermes* is educational literature, with convincing arguments. Still, I will be satisfied that the paper fulfils at least some of the tasks I put before it if after reading it the Reader will feel closer to Hermes and look at his childhood-and-youthful adventures with the understanding and fondness they deserve.

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ASPECTS OF MYTH IN THE *HOMERIC HYMN TO HERMES*

Summary

The author analyzes the myth told in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, focusing on the invention of the lyre as evocative of music, the symposium, youth and education. She follows the trail of educational motifs into its associations with gymnastic contests and their purpose as that of instructing young men in the art of war, finding that domain reflected in baby Hermes' cattle raid. She then explores Hermes' actions as those of a prototypical sacrificer, laying down the foundations for a vital ritual practice to rival the *thysia* established by Prometheus.