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Lies, Lyres, and Laughter in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes

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With its flatulent hero, the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* has long been a source of trouble for scholars. While early 20th century scholars dismissed the hymn as having no serious purpose, Clay (1989), Harrell (1991), and Johnston (2002) have discussed the acquisition of *timê* or questions of cult practice as its purpose. In either case, the prevalence of humor in the hymn has not been addressed as fully as it deserves. Born as a latecomer, Hermes must negotiate a preexisting order and find ways to open up space within this order for himself. I will argue that the hymnist very intentionally uses humor to mark Hermes' negotiation of his relationship to the Olympians Apollo and Zeus. As these gods laugh, they show their acceptance of the new possibilities Hermes reveals, and by extension, of Hermes himself.

In the hymn, laughter acknowledges and welcomes the world that Hermes makes mutable. At three key moments in the hymn, Hermes' actions provoke laughter from other gods: twice from his half-brother Apollo, in Maia's cave (260-281) and upon hearing Hermes' lyre for the first time (416-423); once from his father Zeus, at the defense on Olympus (368-394). Much as oaths mark the development of Hermes as a full member of the gods' community (Fletcher 2008), so too does laughter within the hymn. Dragged up to Olympus by Apollo, Hermes delivers a defense speech that is utterly unconvincing but simultaneously effective for his purpose. Ending his defense, baby Hermes winks and wraps his blanket around himself. By winking, he indicates that Zeus ought to understand this defense differently. Hermes has not come to exculpate himself. Born to a reclusive mother, out of the sight of all the gods (8-9), he has come to be welcomed among the Olympians. Not believing the wily babe, Zeus immediately laughs and bids Hermes to show Apollo where the cattle are. Instead of becoming angry with the lying Hermes, Zeus laughs. In doing so, he shows his approval of Hermes' cleverness. He acknowledges the potential benefits that come from Hermes' attempts to open new space in the cosmos.

With the introduction of this new god, the world becomes a place that eludes simple interpretation. It enters a slippery space inhabited by humor. Humor presents us with surplus satisfaction, something pleasant that we never had to ask for. Though the cosmos may have seemed complete, Hermes makes a claim that there is more to enjoy in the world than we initially thought. Into a static world, Hermes introduces a dynamic flexibility that helps realize additional potentials. He can look at the slow-footed tortoise, and realize its potential as a lyre. By making a lumbering tortoise the companion to the swift movements of the feast (31), Hermes brings laughter to the world. Through laughter, feuding gods are reconciled. The once irate Apollo eventually swears an oath that no one, god or man, will be more dear to him than his wily brother Hermes (524-5). By playing with the world as it is, Hermes can change a threatening foe into a dearest friend.

As the hymnist of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* embraces the humorous potentials of Hermes, he urges us to reflect on what Hermes adds to the world. As we laugh, we come to approve of the changes Hermes has made to the world. Where once there was a world in which a tortoise was simply a tortoise, a new potential has materialized in the form of a lyre. The hymnist recognizes the benefits that can come from understanding the world as one that has room for flux. This flux is not seen as a problem that needs to be nailed down. Instead, as the humor associated with Hermes suggests, this flux is what enables positive changes to the world. If we understand humor as the process of realizing surplus potentials, then we can better understand why the hymnist so willingly employs it to honor crafty Hermes.

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