

English 2332: Dual Credit

The Homeric Hymn to Hermes

Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, [1914]



The Homeric Hymns are a group of poems, each to a specific god (Demeter, Dionysus, and Apollo, among others). These works are written in the style of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and therefore are attributed to Homer, the ancient Greek poet. The following is a prose translation from the original Greek text.

“To Hermes” was approximately recorded around 520 BCE; the material it contains is of greater antiquity. The version supplied here was translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, an important scholar of the early Twentieth Century.

Work citation

“To Hermes.” *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, translator.

London: William Heinemann Ltd. 1914.

[1] Muse, sing of Hermes, the son of Zeus and Maia, lord of Cyllene and Arcadia rich in flocks, the luck-bringing messenger of the immortals whom Maia bare, the rich-tressed nymph, when she was joined in love with Zeus, [5] —a shy goddess, for she avoided the company of the blessed gods, and lived within a deep, shady cave. There the son of Cronos used to lie with the rich-tressed nymph, unseen by deathless gods and mortal men, at dead of night while sweet sleep should hold white-armed Hera fast. [10] And when the purpose of great Zeus was fulfilled, and the tenth moon with her was fixed in heaven, she was delivered and a notable thing was come to pass. For then she bare a son, of many shifts (1), blandly cunning, a robber, a cattle driver, a bringer of dreams, [15] a watcher by night, a thief at the gates, one who was soon to show forth wonderful deeds among the deathless gods. Born with the dawning, at mid-day he played on the lyre, and in the evening he stole the cattle of far-shooting Apollo on the fourth day of the month; for on that day queenly Maia bare him. [20] 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. But as he stepped over the threshold of the high-roofed cave, he found a tortoise there and gained endless delight. [25] For it was Hermes who first made the tortoise a singer. The creature fell in his way at the courtyard gate, where it was feeding on the rich grass before the dwelling, waddling along. When he saw it, the luck-bringing son of Zeus laughed and said:

[30] “An omen of great luck for me so soon! (2) I do not slight it. Hail, comrade of the feast, lovely in shape, sounding at the dance! With joy I meet you! Where got you that rich gaud for covering, that spangled shell —a tortoise living in the mountains? But I will take and carry you within: you shall help me [35] and I will do you no disgrace, though first of all you must profit me. It is better to be at home:

harm may come out of doors. Living, you shall be a spell against mischievous witchcraft (3); but if you die, then you shall make sweetest song.”

Thus speaking, he took up the tortoise in both hands [40] and went back into the house carrying his charming toy. Then he cut off its limbs and scooped out the marrow of the mountain-tortoise with a scoop of grey iron. As a swift thought darts through the heart of a man when thronging cares haunt him, [45] or as bright glances flash from the eye, so glorious Hermes planned both thought and deed at once. He cut stalks of reed to measure and fixed them, fastening their ends across the back and through the shell of the tortoise, and then stretched ox hide all over it by his skill. [50] Also he put in the horns and fitted a cross-piece upon the two of them, and stretched seven strings of sheep-gut. But when he had made it he proved each string in turn with the key, as he held the lovely thing. [55] At the touch of his hand it sounded marvelously; and, as he tried it, the god sang sweet random snatches, even as youths bandy taunts at festivals. He sang of Zeus the son of Cronos and neat-shod Maia, the converse which they had before in the comradeship of love, telling all the glorious tale of his own begetting. [60] He celebrated, too, the handmaids of the nymph, and her bright home, and the tripods all about the house, and the abundant cauldrons.

But while he was singing of all these, his heart was bent on other matters. And he took the hollow lyre and laid it in his sacred cradle, [65] and sprang from the sweet-smelling hall to a watch-place, pondering sheer trickery in his heart —deeds such as knavish folk pursue in the dark night-time; for he longed to taste flesh.

The Sun was going down beneath the earth towards Ocean with his horses and chariot when Hermes [70] came hurrying to the shadowy mountains of Pieria, where the divine cattle of the blessed gods had their steads and grazed the pleasant, unmown meadows. Of these the Son of Maia, the sharp-eyed slayer of Argus (4) then cut off from the herd fifty loud-lowing kine, [75] and drove them straggling-wise across a sandy place, turning their hoof-prints aside. Also, he bethought him of a crafty ruse and reversed the marks of their hoofs, making the front behind and the hind before, while he himself walked the other way. (5) Then he wove sandals with wicker-work by the sand of the sea, [80] wonderful things, unthought of, unimagined; for he mixed together tamarisk and myrtle-twigs, fastening together an armful of their fresh, young wood, and tied them, leaves and all securely under his feet as light sandals. That brushwood the glorious Slayer of Argus [85] plucked in Pieria as he was preparing for his journey, making shift (6) as one making haste for a long journey.

But an old man tilling his flowering vineyard (7) saw him as he was hurrying down the plain through grassy Onchestus. So the Son of Maia began and said to him:

[90] “Old man, digging about your vines with bowed shoulders, surely you shall have much wine when all these bear fruit, [91a] if you obey me and strictly remember not to have seen what you have seen, and not to have heard what you have heard, and to keep silent when nothing of your own is harmed.”

When he had said this much, he hurried the strong cattle on together: [95] through many shadowy mountains and echoing gorges and flowery plains glorious Hermes drove them. And now the divine night, his dark ally, was mostly passed, and dawn that sets folk to work was quickly coming on, while bright Selene, [100] daughter of the lord Pallas, Megamedes' son, had just climbed her watch-post, when the strong Son of Zeus drove the wide-browed cattle of Phoebus Apollo to the river Alpheus. And they came unwearied to the high-roofed byres and the drinking-troughs that were before the noble meadow. [105] Then, after he had well-fed the loud-bellowing cattle with fodder and driven them into the byre, close-packed and chewing lotus and dewy galingal, he gathered a pile of wood and began to seek the art of fire. He chose a stout laurel branch and trimmed it with the knife [110]

(8) [110] held firmly in his hand: and the hot smoke rose up. For it was Hermes who first invented fire-sticks and fire. (9) 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 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, (10) 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. (11) 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. (12) [130] Then glorious Hermes longed for the sacrificial meat, for the sweet savour wearied [*Hyde: weakened*] him, god though he was; nevertheless his proud heart (13) was not prevailed upon to devour the flesh, although he greatly desired. (14) 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, and so spent the night while Selene's soft light shone down. Then the god went straight back again at dawn to the bright crests of Cyllene, and no one met him on the long journey either of the blessed gods or mortal men, [145] nor did any dog bark. (15) And luck-bringing Hermes, the son of Zeus, passed edgeways through the key-hole of the hall like

the autumn breeze, even as mist: straight through the cave he went and came to the rich inner chamber, walking softly, and making no noise as one might upon the floor. [150] Then glorious Hermes went hurriedly to his cradle, wrapping his swaddling clothes about his shoulders as though he were a feeble babe, and lay playing with the covering about his knees; but at his left hand he kept close his sweet lyre.

But the god did not pass unseen by the goddess his mother; but she said to him: [155] “How now, you rogue! Whence come you back so at night-time, you that wear shamelessness as a garment? (16) And now I surely believe the son of Leto will soon have you forth out of doors with unbreakable cords about your ribs, or you will live a rogue's life in the glens robbing by whites. [160] Go to, then; your father got you to be a great worry to mortal men and deathless gods.”

Then Hermes answered her with crafty words: “Mother, why do you seek to frighten me like a feeble child whose heart knows few words of blame, [165] a fearful babe that fears its mother's scolding? 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. [170] Better to live in fellowship with the deathless gods continually, rich, wealthy, and enjoying stores of grain, than to sit always in a gloomy cave: and, as regards honor, I too will enter upon the rite that Apollo has. If my father will not give it me, [175] I will seek —and I am able —to be a prince of robbers. And if Leto's most glorious son shall seek me out, I think another and a greater loss will befall him. For I will go to Pytho to break into his great house, and will plunder therefrom splendid tripods, and cauldrons, [180] and gold, and plenty of bright iron, and much apparel; and you shall see it if you will.”

With such words they spoke together, the son of Zeus who holds the aegis, and the lady Maia. Now Eos the early born, bringing light to men, [185] was rising from deep-flowing Ocean, when Apollo, as he went, came to Onchestus, the lovely grove and sacred place of the loud-roaring Holder of the Earth. (17) There he found an old man grazing his beast along the pathway from his court-yard fence, and the all-glorious Son of Leto began and said to him.

[190] “Old man, weeder (18) of grassy Onchestus, I am come here from Pieria seeking cattle, cows all of them, all with curving horns, from my herd. The black bull was grazing alone away from the rest, but fierce-eyed hounds followed the cows, [195] four of them, all of one mind, like men. These were left behind, the dogs and the bull —which is a great marvel; but the cows strayed out of the soft meadow, away from the pasture when the sun was just going down. Now tell me this, old man born long ago: have you seen [200] one passing along behind those cows?”

Then the old man answered him and said: “My son, it is hard to tell all that one's eyes see; for many wayfarers pass to and fro this way, some bent on much evil, and some on good: [205] it is difficult to know each one. However, I was digging about my plot of vineyard all day long until the sun went down,

and I thought, good sir, but I do not know for certain, that I marked a child, whoever the child was, that followed long-horned cattle— [210] an infant who had a staff and kept walking from side to side: he was driving them backwards way, with their heads towards him.”

So said the old man. And when Apollo heard this report, he went yet more quickly on his way, and presently, seeing a long-winged bird, he knew at once by that omen that the thief was the child of Zeus the son of Cronos. [215] So the lord Apollo, son of Zeus, hurried on to goodly Pylos seeking his shambling oxen, and he had his broad shoulders covered with a dark cloud. But when the Far-Shooter perceived the tracks, he cried:

“Oh, oh! Truly this is a great marvel that my eyes behold! [220] These are indeed the tracks of straight-horned oxen, but they are turned backwards towards the flowery meadow. But these others are not the footprints of man or woman or grey wolves or bears or lions, nor do I think they are the tracks of a rough-maned Centaur — [225] whoever it be that with swift feet makes such monstrous footprints; wonderful are the tracks on this side of the way, but yet more wonderful are those on that.”

When he had so said, the lord Apollo, the Son of Zeus hastened on and came to the forest-clad mountain of Cyllene and the deep-shadowed cave in the rock where the divine nymph [230] brought forth the child of Zeus who is the son of Cronos. A sweet odor spread over the lovely hill, and many thin-shanked sheep were grazing on the grass. Then far-shooting Apollo himself stepped down in haste over the stone threshold into the dusky cave.

[235] Now when the Son of Zeus and Maia saw Apollo in a rage about his cattle, he snuggled down in his fragrant swaddling-clothes; and as wood-ash covers over the deep embers of tree-stumps, so Hermes cuddled himself up when he saw the Far-Shooter. [240] He squeezed head and hands and feet together in a small space, like a new born child seeking sweet sleep, though in truth he was wide awake, and he kept his lyre under his armpit. But the Son of Leto was aware and failed not to perceive the beautiful mountain-nymph and her dear son, [245] albeit a little child and swathed so craftily. He peered in every corner of the great dwelling and, taking a bright key, he opened three closets full of nectar and lovely ambrosia. And much gold and silver was stored in them, [250] and many garments of the nymph, some purple and some silvery white, such as are kept in the sacred houses of the blessed gods. Then, after the Son of Leto had searched out the recesses of the great house, he spake to glorious Hermes:

“Child, lying in the cradle, make haste and tell me of my cattle, [255] 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.” (19)

[260] Then Hermes answered him with crafty words: “Son of Leto, what harsh words are these you have spoken? And is it cattle of the field you are come here to seek? I have not seen them: I have not heard of them: no one has told me of them. I cannot give news of them, nor win the reward for news.

[265] Am I like a cattle-lifter, a stalwart person? This is no task for me: rather I care for other things: I care for sleep, and milk of my mother's breast, and wrappings round my shoulders, and warm baths. Let no one hear the cause of this dispute; [270] for this would be a great marvel indeed among the deathless gods, that a child newly born should pass in through the forepart of the house with cattle of the field: herein you speak extravagantly. I was born yesterday, and my feet are soft and the ground beneath is rough; nevertheless, if you will have it so, I will swear a great oath by my father's head and vow that [275] neither am I guilty myself, neither have I seen any other who stole your cows —whatever cows may be; for I know them only by hearsay.”

So, then, said Hermes, shooting quick glances from his eyes: and he kept raising his brows and looking this way and that, [280] whistling long and listening to Apollo's story as to an idle tale.

But far-working Apollo laughed softly and said to him: “O rogue, deceiver, crafty in heart, you talk so innocently that I most surely believe that you have broken into many a well-built house and stripped more than one poor wretch bare this night, [285] (290) gathering his goods together all over the house without noise. You will plague many a lonely herdsman in mountain glades, when you come on herds and thick-fleeced sheep, and have a hankering after flesh. But come now, if you would not sleep your last and latest sleep, [290] get out of your cradle, you comrade of dark night. Surely hereafter this shall be your title amongst the deathless gods, to be called the prince of robbers continually.”

So said Phoebus Apollo, and took the child and began to carry him. But at that moment the strong Slayer of Argus [295] had his plan, and, while Apollo held him in his hands, sent forth an omen, a hard-worked belly-serf, a rude messenger, and sneezed directly after. And when Apollo heard it, he dropped glorious Hermes out of his hands on the ground: [300] then sitting down before him, though he was eager to go on his way, he spoke mockingly to Hermes:

“Fear not, little swaddling baby, son of Zeus and Maia. I shall find the strong cattle presently by these omens, and you shall lead the way.”

When Apollo had so said, Cyllenian Hermes sprang up quickly, [305] starting in haste. With both hands he pushed up to his ears the covering that he had wrapped about his shoulders, and said:

“Where are you carrying me, Far-Worker, hastiest of all the gods? Is it because of your cattle that you are so angry and harass me? O dear, would that all the sort of oxen might perish; for it is not I [310]

who stole your cows, nor did I see another steal them —whatever cows may be, and of that I have only heard report. Nay, give right and take it before Zeus, the Son of Cronos.”

So Hermes the shepherd and Leto's glorious son [315] kept stubbornly disputing each article of their quarrel: Apollo, speaking truly ... not unfairly sought to seize glorious Hermes because of the cows; but he, the Cyllenian, tried to deceive the God of the Silver Bow with tricks and cunning words. But when, though he had many wiles, he found the other had as many shifts, [320] he began to walk across the sand, himself in front, while the Son of Zeus and Leto came behind. Soon they came, these lovely children of Zeus, to the top of fragrant Olympus, to their father, the Son of Cronos; for there were the scales of judgement set for them both. [325] There was an assembly on snowy Olympus, and the immortals who perish not were gathering after the hour of gold-throned Dawn.

Then Hermes and Apollo of the Silver Bow stood at the knees of Zeus: and Zeus who thunders on high spoke to his glorious son and asked him:

[330] “Phoebus, whence come you driving this great spoil, a child new born that has the look of a herald? This is a weighty matter that is come before the council of the gods.”

Then the lord, far-working Apollo, answered him: “O my father, you shall soon hear no trifling tale though you reproach me [335] that I alone am fond of spoil. Here is a child, a burgling robber, whom I found after a long journey in the hills of Cyllene: for my part I have never seen one so pert either among the gods or all men that catch folk unawares throughout the world. [340] He stole away my cows from their meadow and drove them off in the evening along the shore of the loud-roaring sea, making straight for Pylos. There were double tracks, and wonderful they were, such as one might marvel at, the doing of a clever sprite; for as for the cows, the dark dust kept and showed their footprints leading towards the flowery meadow; [345] but he himself —bewildering creature —crossed the sandy ground outside the path, not on his feet nor yet on his hands; but, furnished with some other means he trudged his way —wonder of wonders! —as though one walked on slender oak-trees. [350] Now while he followed the cattle across sandy ground, all the tracks showed quite clearly in the dust; but when he had finished the long way across the sand, presently the cows' track and his own could not be traced over the hard ground. But a mortal man noticed him [355] as he drove the wide-browed kine straight towards Pylos. And as soon as he had shut them up quietly, and had gone home by crafty turns and twists, he lay down in his cradle in the gloom of a dim cave, as still as dark night, so that not even [360] an eagle keenly gazing would have spied him. Much he rubbed his eyes with his hands as he prepared falsehood, and himself straightway said roundly: `I have not seen them: I have not heard of them: no man has told me of them. I could not tell you of them, nor win the reward of telling.’”

[365] When he had so spoken, Phoebus Apollo sat down. But Hermes on his part answered and said, pointing at the Son of Cronos, the lord of all the gods:

“Zeus, my father, indeed I will speak truth to you; for I am truthful and I cannot tell a lie. [370] He came to our house to-day looking for his shambling cows, as the sun was newly rising. He brought no witnesses with him nor any of the blessed gods who had seen the theft, but with great violence ordered me to confess, threatening much to throw me into wide Tartarus. [375] For he has the rich bloom of glorious youth, while I was born but yesterday —as he too knows —, nor am I like a cattle-lifter, a sturdy fellow. Believe my tale (for you claim to be my own father) , that I did not drive his cows to my house —so may I prosper— [380] nor crossed the threshold: this I say truly. I reverence Helios greatly and the other gods, and you I love and him I dread. You yourself know that I am not guilty: and I will swear a great oath upon it:—No! by these rich-decked porticoes of the gods. [385] And some day I will punish him, strong as he is, for this pitiless inquisition; but now do you help the younger.”

So spake the Cyllenian, the Slayer of Argus, while he kept shooting sidelong glances and kept his swaddling-clothes upon his arm, and did not cast them away. But Zeus laughed out loud to see his evil-plotting child [390] well and cunningly denying guilt about the cattle. And he bade them both to be of one mind and search for the cattle, and guiding Hermes to lead the way and, without mischievousness of heart, to show the place where now he had hidden the strong cattle. [395] Then the Son of Cronos bowed his head: and goodly Hermes obeyed him; for the will of Zeus who holds the aegis easily prevailed with him.

Then the two all-glorious children of Zeus hastened both to sandy Pylos, and reached the ford of Alpheus, and came to the fields and the high-roofed byre [400] where the beasts were cherished at night-time. Now while Hermes went to the cave in the rock and began to drive out the strong cattle, the son of Leto, looking aside, saw the cowhides on the sheer rock. And he asked glorious Hermes at once:

[405] “How were you able, you crafty rogue, to flay two cows, new-born and babyish as you are? For my part, I dread the strength that will be yours: there is no need you should keep growing long, Cyllenian, son of Maia!”

So saying, Apollo twisted strong withes with his hands [409a] meaning to bind Hermes with firm bands; [409b] but the bands would not hold him, and the withes of osier fell far from him [410] and began to grow at once from the ground beneath their feet in that very place. And intertwining with one another, they quickly grew and covered all the wild-roving cattle by the will of thievish Hermes, so that Apollo was astonished as he gazed.

Then the strong slayer of Argus [415] looked furtively upon the ground with eyes flashing fire ... desiring to hide ...

Very easily he softened the son of all-glorious Leto as he would, stern though the Far-shooter was. He took the lyre upon his left arm and tried each string in turn with the key, so that at his touch [420] it sounded awesomely. 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. Then the son of Maia, harping sweetly upon his lyre, took courage and stood at the left hand [425] of Phoebus Apollo; and soon, while he played shrilly on his lyre, he lifted up his voice and sang, (21) and lovely was the sound of his voice that followed. He sang 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, [430] 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 as he struck the lyre upon his arm. But Apollo was seized with a longing not to be allayed, [435] and he opened his mouth and spoke winged words to Hermes:

“Slayer of oxen, trickster, busy one, comrade of the feast, this song of yours is worth fifty cows, and I believe that presently we shall settle our quarrel peacefully. But come now, tell me this, resourceful son of Maia: [440] has this marvellous thing been with you from your birth, or did some god or mortal man give it you—a noble gift—and teach you heavenly song? For wonderful is this new-uttered sound I hear, the like of which I vow that no man [445] nor god dwelling on Olympus ever yet has known but you, O thievish son of Maia. What skill is this? What song for desperate cares? What way of song? For verily here are three things to hand all at once from which to choose,—mirth, and love, and sweet sleep. [450] 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: [455] I am filled with wonder, O son of Zeus, at your sweet playing. But now, since you, though little, have such glorious skill, sit down, dear boy, and respect the words of your elders For now you shall have renown among the deathless gods, you and your mother also. This I will declare to you exactly: [460] by this shaft of cornel wood I will surely make you a leader renowned among the deathless gods, and fortunate, and will give you glorious gifts and will not deceive you from first to last.”

Then Hermes answered him with artful words: “You question me carefully, O Far-worker; yet I am [465] not jealous that you should enter upon my art: this day you shall know it. For I seek to be friendly with you both in thought and word. Now you well know all things in your heart, since you sit foremost among the deathless gods, O son of Zeus, and are goodly and strong. And wise Zeus loves you [470] as all right is, and has given you splendid gifts. And they say that from the utterance of Zeus you have learned both the honors due to the gods, O Far-worker, and oracles from Zeus, even all his ordinances.

Of all these I myself have already learned that you have great wealth. Now, you are free to learn whatever you please; [475] but since, as it seems, your heart is so strongly set on playing the lyre, chant, and play upon it, and give yourself to merriment, taking this as a gift from me, and do you, my friend, bestow glory on me. Sing well with this clear-voiced companion in your hands; for you are skilled in good, well-ordered utterance. [480] From now on bring it confidently to the rich feast and lovely dance and glorious revel, a joy by night and by day. Whoso with wit and wisdom enquires of it cunningly, him it teaches [485] through its sound all manner of things that delight the mind, being easily played with gentle familiarities, for it abhors toilsome drudgery; but whoso in ignorance enquires of it violently, to him it chatters mere vanity and foolishness. But you are able to learn whatever you please. [490] So then, I will give you this lyre, glorious son of Zeus, while I for my part will graze down with wild-roving cattle the pastures on hill and horse-feeding plain: so shall the cows covered by the bulls calve abundantly both males and females. And now there is no need for you, [495] bargainer though you are, to be furiously angry.”

When Hermes had said this, he held out the lyre: and Phoebus Apollo took it, and readily put his shining whip in Hermes' hand, and ordained him keeper of herds. The son of Maia received it joyfully, [500] while the glorious son of Leto, the lord far-working Apollo, took the lyre upon his left arm and tried each string with the key. Awesomely it sounded at the touch of the god, while he sang sweetly to its note.

Afterwards they two, the all-glorious sons of Zeus turned the cows back towards the sacred meadow, [505] but themselves hastened back to snowy Olympus, delighting in the lyre. Then wise Zeus was glad and made them both friends. And Hermes loved the son of Leto continually, even as he does now, when he had given the lyre as token to the Far-shooter, [510] who played it skilfully, holding it upon his arm. But for himself Hermes found out another cunning art and made himself the pipes whose sound is heard afar.

Then the son of Leto said to Hermes: “Son of Maia, guide and cunning one, I fear [515] you may steal from me the lyre and my curved bow together; for you have an office from Zeus, to establish deeds of barter amongst men throughout the fruitful earth. (22) Now if you would only swear me the great oath of the gods, either by nodding your head, or by the potent water of Styx, [520] you would do all that can please and ease my heart.”

Then Maia's son nodded his head and promised that he would never steal anything of all the Far-shooter possessed, and would never go near his strong house; but Apollo, son of Leto, swore to be fellow and friend to Hermes, [525] vowing that he would love no other among the immortals, neither god nor man sprung from Zeus, better than Hermes: [526a] and the Father sent forth an eagle in confirmation. And Apollo swear also: “Verily I will make you only to be an omen for the immortals and

all alike, trusted and honored by my heart. Moreover, I will give you a splendid staff of riches and wealth: [530] it is of gold, with three branches, and will keep you scatheless, accomplishing every task, whether of words or deeds that are good, which I claim to know through the utterance of Zeus. But as for sooth-saying, noble, heaven-born child, of which you ask, it is not lawful for you to learn it, nor for any other [535] of the deathless gods: only the mind of Zeus knows that. I am pledged and have vowed and sworn a strong oath that no other of the eternal gods save I should know the wise-hearted counsel of Zeus. And do not you, my brother, bearer of the golden wand, bid me [540] tell those decrees which all-seeing Zeus intends. As for men, I will harm one and profit another, sorely perplexing the tribes of unenviable men. Whosoever shall come guided by the call and flight of birds of sure omen, [545] that man shall have advantage through my voice, and I will not deceive him. But whoso shall trust to idly-chattering birds and shall seek to invoke my prophetic art contrary to my will, and to understand more than the eternal gods, I declare that he shall come on an idle journey; yet his gifts I would take.

[550] But I will tell you another thing, Son of all-glorious Maia and Zeus who holds the aegis, luck-bringing genius of the gods. There are certain holy ones, sisters born —three virgins (23) gifted with wings: their heads are besprinkled with white meal, [555] and they dwell under a ridge of Parnassus. These are teachers of divination apart from me, the art which I practised while yet a boy following herds, though my father paid no heed to it. From their home they fly now here, now there, feeding on honey-comb and bringing all things to pass. [560] And when they are inspired through eating yellow honey, they are willing to speak truth; but if they be deprived of the gods' sweet food, then they speak falsely, as they swarm in and out together. These, then, I give you; enquire of them strictly [565] and delight your heart: and if you should teach any mortal so to do, often will he hear your response —if he have good fortune. Take these, Son of Maia, and tend the wild roving, horned oxen and horses and patient mules.”

[568a] So he spake. And from heaven father Zeus himself gave confirmation to his words, [568b] and commanded that glorious Hermes should be lord over all birds of omen and grim-eyed lions, and boars with gleaming tusks, [570] and over dogs and all flocks that the wide earth nourishes, and over all sheep; also that he only should be the appointed messenger to Hades, who, though he takes no gift, shall give him no mean prize.

Thus the lord Apollo showed his kindness for the Son of Maia [575] by all manner of friendship: and the Son of Cronos gave him grace besides. He consorts with all mortals and immortals: a little he profits, but continually throughout the dark night he cozens the tribes of mortal men.

And so, farewell, Son of Zeus and Maia; [580] but I will remember you and another song also.

Footnotes

Entries below which appear in orange are from a supplemental text:

“Hymn to Hermes,” *Lewis Hyde trans. Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art*

(New York: North Point Press, 1999), pp. 317-31.

(1) Or “cunning,” “versatile,” “much traveled,” “polytropic”: *pol-tropon* (literally, turning-many-ways).

In all of Greek literature, three characters are polytropic: Hermes, Odysseus, and Alcibiades.

(See footnote 6.)

(2) *Hermaion*: a lucky find.

(3) Pliny notices the efficacy of the flesh of a tortoise against witchcraft. In *Geoponica* i. 14. 8 the living tortoise is prescribed as a charm to preserve vineyards from hail.

(4) Argus Panoptes (the bright one, all eyes) was a watchful giant. He had a hundred or more eyes all over his body; some of his eyes would sometimes close for sleep, but never all of them. I take him to be an image of the watchfulness of a shame society.

(5) Hermes makes the cattle walk backwards, so that they seem to be going towards the meadow instead of leaving it (cp. 1. 345); he himself walks in the normal manner, relying on his sandals as a disguise.

(6) Such seems to be the meaning indicated by the context, though the verb is taken by Allen and Sikes to mean, “to be like oneself,” and so “to be original.”

(7) Other versions of the story we know this man's name is Battus.

(8) Kuhn points out that there is a **lacuna** here. In 1. 109 the borer is described, but the friction of this upon the fire-block (to which the phrase “held firmly” clearly belongs) must also have been mentioned.

(Instructor's note: According to Merriam-Webster, a lacuna is “a blank space or a missing part: gap” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lacuna>).

(9) Hermes does not invent fire; he invents a method of making fire, a trick, a *techné*.

(10) The cows being on their sides on the ground, Hermes bends their heads back towards their flanks and so can reach their backbones.

(11) O. Muller thinks the “hides” were a stalactite formation in the “Cave of Nestor” near Messenian Pylos, —though the cave of Hermes is near the Alpheus (1. 139). Others suggest that actual skins were shown as relics before some cave near Triphylian Pylos.

(12) Gemoll explains that Hermes, having offered all the meat as sacrifice to the Twelve Gods, remembers that he himself as one of them must be content with the savour instead of the substance of the sacrifice. Can it be that by eating he would have forfeited the position he claimed as one of the Twelve Gods?

(13) *Thymos*: “heart,” “soul,” “breath,” “mind”—the Homeric Greeks located intelligence in the chest and the speaking voice, not in the silent brain.

(14) The twelve portions are *mo-ras* or “lots,” “allotments.” Hermes makes one for each of the twelve Olympian gods (Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Aphrodite, Hermes, Athena, Hephaestus, and Hestia).

(15) There is another version of the story in which dogs were guarding Apollo's cattle. Hermes silenced them by putting them into a stupor.

(16) Or "wearing the cloak of shamelessness": *anaideien epieimene*.

(17) Poseidon.

(18) *Lit.* "thorn-plucker."

(19) Hermes is ambitious (1.175), but if he is cast into Hades he will have to be content with the leadership of mere babies like himself, since those in Hades retain the state of growth —whether childhood or manhood —in which they are at the moment of leaving the upper world.

(20) Literally, "you have made him sit on the floor," i.e. "you have stolen everything down to his last chair."

(21) Literally, "he began to sing in prelude fashion, with a lovely voice." Scholars assume that Homeric hymns such as this one were sung as preludes to longer performances. At this point, therefore, a bard singing the *Hymn* describes Hermes as the bard himself would be described "singing in prelude fashion."

(22) Note that Apollo assumes that someone involved in the marketplace will also be a thief. The world of this *Hymn* does not make a clear distinction between stealing and making a profit.

(23) The Thriae, who practised divination by means of pebbles (also called θριαί). In this hymn they are represented as aged maidens (ll. 553-4), but are closely associated with bees (ll. 559-563) and possibly are here conceived as having human heads and breasts with the bodies and wings of bees.

(Hyde: These are called the Bee Maidens. Apollo gives Hermes a minor prophetic art.)
