

GREEK & ROMAN STUDIES 209
SELECT OLYMPIANS: *Hermes: A Trickster God*

Assigned Reading: Chapter I.12, “Hermes”,
in Mark Morford et al., *Classical Mythology* (11th ed.), pp. 281-299



Hermes, with winged traveller's hat (petasos) and wand (caduceus). Detail of Attic red-figure calyx-krater, c. 515 B.C. Museo Nazionale Cerite, Cerveteri, Italy.

“I sing about Hermes, the Cyllenian slayer of Argus, lord of Mt Cyllene and Arcadia rich in flocks, the messenger of the gods and bringer of luck, whom Maia, the daughter of Atlas, bore, after uniting in love with Zeus.”

Homeric Hymn 18 (To Hermes) 1ff. (Morford et al., p. 281)

Our next select Olympian, Hermes, is commemorated in two Homeric Hymns, an archaic collection of poems which, despite their title, are not by Homer; they probably date to the sixth century B.C. The shorter one (No. 18) is quoted above; your textbook also contains the much lengthier Hymn (No. 4) in full (pp. 282-291). Here we shall focus on aspects of both, especially their representation of Hermes as a ‘trickster’. This is a category we have visited before, but Hermes, though resembling his great-uncle Prometheus in several ways, bears some remarkable features that distinguish them.



Trickster Gods in Various Mythical Traditions:

(far left) Loki (Norse), with his invention, the fishing-net; from 18th cent. Icelandic manuscript.
(centre left) Hanuman (Hindu); from Chola Dynasty, 11th cent.; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
(centre) Hermes. Attic red-figure lekythos, c. 480-470 B.C. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
(centre right) Prometheus (Greek), with Atlas; Laconian black-figure cup, c. 560 B.C.
Vatican Museums, Rome. (far right) Coyote (Native American); rock painting,
Nine Mile Canyon, Utah.

Homeric Hymn 18, cited on the previous page, applies several epithets to Hermes in its opening lines. ‘Cyllenian’ (Kyllēnios), ‘messenger of the gods’ (angelos athanatōn), and ‘luck-bringing’ (erionūnēs) indicate, respectively, his place of birth (Mount Cyllene, in northern Arcadia), his function among the Olympians (like Iris, he is a go-between), and his relationship to humans (he brings good fortune). ‘Slayer of Argus’ (Argeiphontēs), however, tells a tale of its own (cf. #1 and 2 below), and brilliantly instantiates his trickery.



Hermes Argeiphontēs rescues Io, in the shape of a cow, from the hundred-eyed Argus; Zeus observes at far right. Red-figure stamnos. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

The Slayer of Argus

The myth of Hermes and Argus, a hundred-eyed monster, is summarized in your textbook on pp. 97-99, under the heading, ‘Io, Zeus, and Prometheus’. The girl Io, another hapless victim of Zeus’ sexual libido, is changed into a cow in order to hide her from Hera’s jealous rage. The ruse (Zeus’ own vain attempt at trickery) doesn’t work. The Queen of the gods commissions Argus to guard and torment Io:

1. [Io speaking to Prometheus:] “The giant herdsman Argus, savage in his rage, accompanied me, watching with his countless eyes my every step. A sudden unexpected fate deprived him of his life”

Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 678ff. (Morford, p. 99)

The “unexpected fate” is the arrival of Hermes on the scene. (Perhaps Aeschylus does not mention the god by name because elsewhere in the play Hermes is a villain—Zeus’ henchman and the enemy of Prometheus—and the playwright does not wish to give him heroic credit here.) We must turn to the later Roman poet Ovid, who employs the Latin names of the characters involved, to flesh out the tale:

2. “Juno [i.e., Hera] handed the heifer over to Argus to keep guard. Argus had a hundred eyes in his head, of which two at a time took their rest, while the others kept watch and remained at their station The ruler of the heavens, unable to tolerate such a sight, calls his son, whom the bright Pleiad* bore him, and commands him to kill Argus. With little delay, Mercury [i.e., Hermes] attached wings to his feet, put his hat on his head, and took in hand his sleep-inducing wand [*virga somnifera*, i.e., the *caduceus*]. Jove’s [i.e., Zeus’] son then leapt from his native citadel [Olympus] onto the earth. There he removed his hat, and put aside his wings, retaining only his wand. In the guise of a herdsman, he drives his goats through the country-

side, while playing on his oaten reeds. Juno's guardsman, captivated by this new sound, says, 'Whoever you are, sit down beside me on this rock, for you will find no better pasture for your herd, and you see how nice the shade is for herders such as ourselves.' The descendent of Atlas [*Atlantiades*] sits and passes the day in conversation. Then, making melody on his joined reeds [i.e., pan-pipes], he tries to overcome Argus' watchful eyes. Argus, however, resists the sweet strains; while sleep overcomes some of his eyes, the others remain vigilant. Then Argus asks how the pipes were discovered (for the instrument had only recently been invented)." *[Ovid interrupts the story, as is his style, to recount the myth of Pan and the nymph Syrinx.]* "While the Cyllenian spoke, he watched all of Argus' eyes succumbing to sleep. He lowers his voice and lulls the drooping eyelids into slumber with his magic wand [*medicata virga*]. Then, without delay, he strikes the sleeper with his sword, where neck and head join, and stains the rock with blood. There you lie, Argus, the light extinguished from so many eyes; now a single night envelops them all. Saturn's [i.e., Cronus'] daughter [Juno] takes these eyes and places them in the feathers of her bird, filling its tail with starry gems."

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.623ff., 667-688, 712-722 (tr. J.R. Hume; not in Morford)

**Maia was one of Atlas' daughters known as the Pleiades.*



The story of the slaying of Argus becomes, in the hands of Ovid, an aetiological myth, i.e., one that explains the cause (aitios) of some natural phenomenon—in this case, how the peacock got the 'eyes' in its tail. Of more interest to us is the light it throws on Hermes' character as a trickster. The god uses his inventiveness, his talent for disguise, and his musical ability to deceive Argus, then kill him. The story has an ambivalence that is characteristic of most of Hermes' myths: he is at once charming and treacherous, chivalrous (towards Io) and deadly (towards Argus). As the longer of the Homeric Hymns to Hermes puts it:

3. "[T]he child whom [Maia] bore was devious [*polytropos*], winning in his cleverness [*haimylomētēs*], a robber, a driver of cattle, a guide of dreams, a spy in the night, a watcher at the door, who soon was about to manifest renowned deeds among the immortal gods."

Homeric Hymn 4 (To Hermes), 15f. (Morford, p. 282)

*More epithets! One of them, *polytropos*, also occurs in the opening line of the *Odyssey* and many times thereafter in that poem, where Homer likes to apply it to his wily hero, *Odysseus*.* Another, *haimylomētēs* (literally, 'clever with flattery'), incorporates the name of Zeus' first wife, *Mētis*, the very symbol of cunning. These are qualities, then, that befit an Olympian, though no one is more adept at guile and wheedling than Hermes, who can trick even his fellow gods. His half-brother *Apollo* is his most famous victim, which brings us to the main subject of Homeric Hymn 4.*

**Pseudo-Apollodorus informs us that Odysseus' maternal grandfather was the thief Autolycus, a son of Hermes!*

A Precocious God

Hermes is unusual among the Olympian gods for having a childhood. Unlike Athena, who sprang from Zeus' head fully-grown, or Apollo, who already at his birth presented the features of a handsome young man, Hermes appears as an infant at the beginning of Homeric Hymn 4. Such a precocious infant he was, too!

4. “Maia bore him on the fourth day of the month. He was born at dawn, by midday he was playing the lyre, and in the evening he stole the cattle of far-shooting Apollo. After he leaped forth from the immortal limbs of his mother, he did not remain lying in his sacred cradle; but he sprang up and looked for the cattle of Apollo.”

Ibid. 17ff. (Morford, p. 282)

These lines look ahead to the two principal episodes in the poem, Hermes' invention of the lyre (which he makes from the shell of a tortoise, ll. 25-67), and his devious theft of Apollo's cattle (ll. 68 to the end of the hymn).

(right) Ancient lyre restored from remains found in Athens; 5th-4th cents. B.C.
British Museum, London.



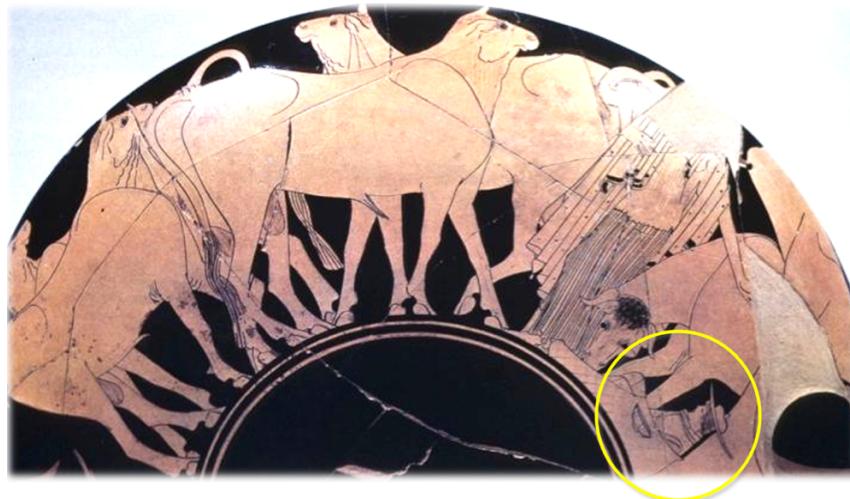
A Cattle Thief

5. “Helius, the Sun, with his horses and chariot was descending to earth and the stream of Ocean, when Hermes came hurrying to . . . where the immortal cattle of the blessed gods have their home, grazing on the lovely untouched meadows. The sharp-sighted [euskopos] son of Maia, the slayer of Argus [Argeiphontēs], cut off from the herd fifty loud-bellowing cattle and drove them over sandy ground, reversing their tracks as they wandered. For he did not forget his skill at trickery [dolia] . . . [T]he strong son of Zeus drove the broad-browed cattle of Phoebus Apollo to the river Alpheus . . . Then, when he had fed [them] . . . he drove them all together into the shelter.” *Ibid.* 68ff. (Morford, p. 283)

(left) *Hermes Moscophoros ('Calf-Bearer')*. This may be a representation of Hermes or simply a calf-herder bearing one of his charges on his shoulders. Hermes was the patron god of herders. Limestone statue, c. 560 B.C., found on the Athenian Acropolis in 1864. Acropolis Museum, Athens.

The story recorded in the Homeric Hymn is not the first time a herd of cattle belonging to the gods has made an appearance in Greek literature. Homer had already featured the Oxen of the Sun (*Helios*) in the Odyssey (Book 12)—three hundred and fifty of them, to be exact (representing the days of the solar year?)—which Odysseus was warned not to slaughter and eat, though his men did so anyway and perished as a result (cf. Morford, p. 525). Only fifty cattle figure in the Homeric Hymn, and they are said to be immortal (though that won't stop Hermes from sacrificing two of them, as we shall see). The Hymn's herd, moreover, is said to belong not to *Helios*—who is mentioned driving his chariot into the sea merely to indicate that a day has passed since Hermes' birth—but to “the blessed gods” in general, and to Phoebus Apollo in particular. Of course, if we remember that Apollo was gradually identified with the Sun, it is not difficult to see connections between the two accounts.

The real purpose, however, of this episode in the Hymn is to glorify Hermes who, barely a day old, had demonstrated his peculiar combination of guile and seeming guilelessness. It is one thing to commit theft, or even play a simple trick; it is another to execute an ingenious plan (driving the cattle backwards, so as to put Apollo off their tracks) while maintaining the apparent innocence of a babe.



Hermes (in his cradle, circled), his mother Maia, and the Cattle of Apollo.
Attic red-figure vase, c. 490 B.C. Vatican Museums.

6. “Glorious Hermes quickly got into his cradle and wrapped the blankets about his shoulders like a helpless baby and lay toying with his fingers at the covers on his knees; at his left side he kept his beloved lyre close by his hand.”

Ibid. 145ff. (Morford, p. 284)

You may fool everyone else, but you cannot fool your mother:

7. “But the god did not escape the notice of his goddess mother, who spoke to him: ‘You devious rogue [*poikilomēta*], in your cloak of shameless guile, where in the world have you come from in the nighttime? Now I am convinced that either Apollo, son of Leto, by his own hands will drag you with your sides bound fast right out the door, or you will prowl about the valleys, a robber and a cheat. Be gone then! Your father begat you as a great trouble for mortals and immortal gods!’”

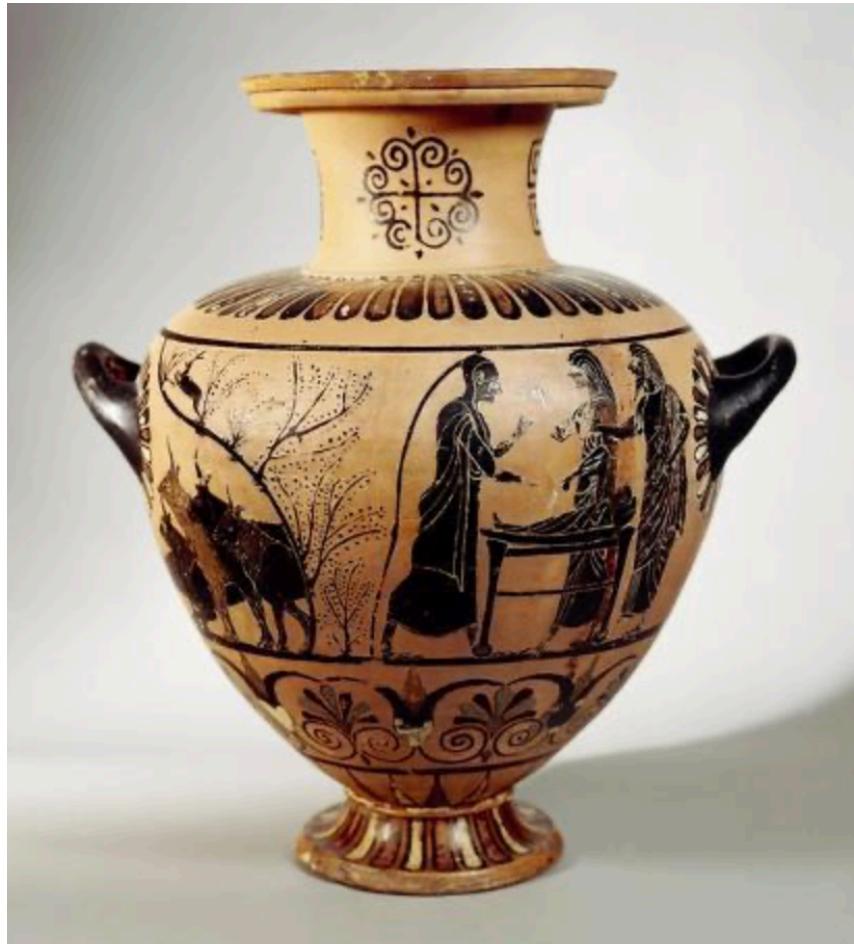
Ibid. 155-161 (Morford, p. 284)

Maia’s prediction does not come true, at least not here, for Hermes and Apollo (and Zeus) will be cheerfully reconciled before the Hymn is through. Her characterization of Hermes as a brigand and cheat, however, presents an alternative, darker portrait of the god. Perhaps the quality that unites these contradictory aspects (' bringer of luck' versus trouble-maker, robber of goods versus inventor of beautiful and useful items like the lyre and fire [see #10 below]), is that of resourcefulness. It is a fine line, after all, between craft and craftiness.

A Deceiver

8. “[T]he archer-god, Apollo himself, hurried over the stone threshold down into the shadowy cave. When the son of Zeus and Maia perceived that far-shooting Apollo was in a rage about his cattle, he sank down into his fragrant blankets . . . [Hermes] huddled head and hands and feet tightly together as though just bathed and ready for sweet sleep, but he was really wide awake, and under his arm he held his lyre. The son of Zeus and Leto knew . . . the little boy enveloped in craft [*doliai*] and deceit [*entropiae*], and he was not fooled.”

Ibid. 227-245 (Morford, p. 286)



Caeretan black-figure hydria c. 520 B.C. (cf. Morford, p.285).
Apollo accuses Hermes (in cradle) of stealing his cattle (which are hidden at left),
while Maia and Zeus look on. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Although Apollo “was not fooled” by Hermes’ display of innocence, nevertheless he was unable to find his cattle, so cleverly had they been hidden. Apollo therefore brings a complaint against his half-brother to their father, Zeus (ll. 333-365 of the Hymn), to which Hermes mounts an utterly charming defence that is replete with lies (ll. 366-388). Zeus’ surprising response (#9 below) places this hymn squarely in the Homeric tradition—where the king of the gods is a bit of a pushover—rather than the Hesiodic. One has only to compare Zeus’ laughing admiration for Hermes’ temerity with his vengeful anger against wily Prometheus in the Theogony, to see the difference. In either tradition, though, the Olympian ‘nod’ is all it takes to settle a disputed point.

9. “Zeus gave a great laugh as he saw the devious [*kakomēdēs*] child knowingly and cleverly make his denials about the cattle. He ordered [Hermes and Apollo] to act in accord and make a search; Hermes, in his role of guide [*diaktoros hēgemoneuein*], was to lead without any malicious intent and point out the spot

where he had hidden away the mighty herd of cattle. The son of Cronus nodded his head and splendid Hermes obeyed, for the will of aegis-bearing Zeus easily persuaded him.” *Ibid.* 389-396 (Morford, p. 288)

Fire & Sacrifice: An Alternative Aetiology

Another illuminating comparison may be made between the aetiological myths offered in Hesiod’s poems about the institution of sacrifice and the human acquisition of fire, and the invention of both in the Homeric Hymn to Hermes. In the former, the gods begrudge us meat and the means to cook it; only a rebel-figure like Prometheus, at the cost of his own freedom, can gain these amenities. By contrast, Hermes (see below), himself an Olympian, discovers the method of sparking fire (an elemental power—symbolized by Hephaestus—that had always been present in kindling and flint), and performs the first sacrifice to the Twelve Gods. How different are these conceptions of our relationship to the gods and to nature itself!

10. “[Hermes] gathered together a quantity of wood and pursued, with diligent passion, the skill [*techne*] of producing fire. He took a good branch of laurel and trimmed it with his knife, and in the palm of his hand he grasped a piece of wood; and the hot breath of fire rose up. Indeed, Hermes was the very first to invent fire sticks and fire While the power of renowned Hephaestus was kindling the fire, Hermes dragged outside near the blaze two horned cattle, bellowing, for much strength went with him Rolling them over, he pierced through their life’s marrow; he followed up this work with more, cutting the meat rich in fat and spearing the pieces with wooden spits, and roasted all together the flesh Next Hermes in the joy of his heart whisked the great bundles away to a smooth flat rock and divided them into twelve portions that he allotted, adding a choice piece to each, making it wholly an honourable offering.”

Ibid. 108-129 (Morford, pp. 283f.)