



## A LIFETIME OF TROUBLE-MAKING: HERMES AS TRICKSTER

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In exploring here some of the many ways the ancient Greek figure of Hermes was represented we sight some of the recurring characteristics of tricksters from a number of cultures. Although the Hermes figure is so complex that a whole catalog of his characteristics could be presented,<sup>1</sup> the sections of this account include just six: (1) his marginality and paradoxical qualities; (2) his erotic and relational aspects; (3) his functions as a creator and restorer; (4) his deceitful thievery; (5) his comedy and wit; and (6) the role ascribed to him in hermeneutics, the art of interpretation whose name is said to be derived from his. The sixth element listed names one of the most significant ways this trickster comes to us—as interpreter, messenger—but the other characteristics we will explore provide important contexts for what is conveyed, and how. This is not just *any* Western Union or Federal Express worker, but a marginal figure whose connective tasks shade over into creativity itself. A hilarious cheat, he sits nonetheless at the golden tables of the deities.

We now recognize that even apparently irreverent stories show that some mythical models could be conceived in a wide range of significances, even satirized, without thereby abandoning the meaning-complex in which the models originated. For example an extract from a satire by Lucian demonstrates that Hermes could be recalled with respect, as well as an ironic chuckle:

HEPHAISTOS. Apollon, have you seen the new baby? Maia's little tot, Hermes? He's beautiful. And he smiles so sweetly at everybody. It looks as if he'll grow up to be a fine young god.

APOLLON. That tot a fine young god? When it comes to making trouble, he acts as if he's been at it a lifetime (Casson 1962: 99, translation of Lucian, *Dialogues of the Gods*, 7).

In the subsequent course of Lucian's staged dialogue between Hephaistos and Apollon, it is noble Apollon who, characteristically, knows everything—a theme that sounds like an omniscient echo from a 1940s radio drama. Hephaistos loses some of his enthusiasm for Hermes' charm when he discovers that "Maia's little tot" has swiped the tongs he uses in his smithy! The pompous Hephaistos and Apollon need deflating, and Hermes-Trickster happily obliges.

Such figures were active in the imaginings of antiquity, and recently the psychotherapist June Singer has indicated how trickster images have a similar balancing function in contemporary materials:

In dreams the trickster is the one who sets obstacles in our path for his own reasons; he is the one who keeps changing shape and reappearing and disappearing at the oddest moments. He symbolizes that aspect of our own nature which is always nearby, ready to bring us down when we get inflated, or to humanize us when we become pompous. He is the satirist par excellence, whose trenchant wit points out the flaws in our haughty ambitions, and makes us laugh though we feel like crying. . . . The major psychological function of the trickster figure is to make it possible for us to gain a sense of proportion about ourselves. (1972: 289–90)

Surely a figure who is so near to hand and so useful for restoring a more modest view of ourselves deserves our concentrated attention, even if in a manifestation (Hermes) whose stories stretch backward several centuries Before the Common Era. While Hermes is not necessarily the master model for figures such as the Native North American tricksters, a look at this oldest Western trickster will show us many of the typological elements that tricksters demonstrate in other cultural settings, and modern trickster categories help us identify modes of appearance of the ancient Hermes.<sup>2</sup>

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## MULTIPLEX MARGINALITY AND PARADOXICALITY

The great range of characteristics of the Hermes figure suggests that the narrow approach that seeks the essence of a figure, its lowest common denominator, may not be most appropriate. Multiplicity and paradoxicality, not singularity and the status quo, are central to Hermes throughout his stories.

Hermes is *marginal*: his peculiar icons—ithyphallic herms (square-cut blocks of stone with an erect phallos on the front, topped with a portrait head of Hermes)—were located at entrances to homes, public buildings, and sleeping chambers, and at crossroads. As the patron of roads and travelers, Hermes guided transitions from one place to another. Because he was particularly active at the twilight margins between daylight and darkness, he was described as the “companion of dark night” (Homeric Hymns 4: 290), or as “furtive Hermes, the nighttime chieftain” (Nonnos 35: 228).

Hermes’ spheres are those of change, movement, and alteration, and his activity is rapid, as signified by the wings on his head, shoulder, or feet, or even—in an Arabic manuscript—on his belted waist. He often remains outwardly invisible, sometimes wearing the cap of invisibility that connects him with Pluton/Hades. His primary honors are offered not at the great regional temples, but at local roadside herms and at crossing points of roads and paths (where images of Hekate were likewise). As patron of craftspersons, cooks, heralds, teachers, and servants, his is a facilitating rather than a commanding role, and Hermes’ presence was acknowledged primarily after he had been among mortals.

With respect to paradoxicality, Hermes is both an old man (*sphêndpôgôn*: having a wedge-shaped beard, like old men in Comedy) and a baby or youth (*achnous*: beardless, downy-checked). He is both the god of thieves and prophylaxis against them; the patron of luck in both commercial gain and accidental loss. He has simultaneously masculine and feminine qualities, if we derive characteristics of the father from his progeny, Hermaphroditos. He is both father and son of the Kabeiroi, and of Priapos; both the son and the lover of Kadmos; the father of Eros by Aphrodite or Artemis, and yet descended from the original triad of Chaos, Gaia, and Eros.

In imagery he is represented as both a country bumpkin and a city slicker; he is conceived of both as a reprehensible thief and deceiver and

as a responsible public speaker and attorney; he is both the bringer and the withholder of sleep and dreams. He is the god of language and speech, who nonetheless makes his appearances veiled in silence, or at gaps in our conversations (“Hermes has entered,” one said, where in older English usage one might observe, after a lull in chatter: “An angel has brought us something to talk about”).

In art and in literature, Hermes is paired with wise Athene in helping heroes, especially Herakles and Perseus, his beloved; or he is paired with home-loving Hestia (see the correlations and contrasts traced by Vernant 1969); but above all, he forms a pair with his bright brother Apollon. In his medieval transformation as Mercurius, he appears as both water and fire, as both Virgin—the passive, feminine aspect—and as Lion or Unicorn—the rampant, masculine, penetrating force, identified with the Christ. He is likewise both the base alchemical substance, the *prima materia*, and its ultimate perfection, the *lapis philosophorum*.

Already in antiquity a cultic Hermes was simultaneously benignly white and malignantly black—a sharp graphing of the polarizations in the character of a deity who was at ease both on Olympos and in the Underworld.<sup>3</sup> Complex titles reflect his paradoxicality and inclusiveness: he is Hermes *Duplex*, and later Hermes *Triplex* or *Trismegistos*, “super-great.” *Pammegistos*, “all-great,” was also used; and even the medieval *Multiplex*, as Hermes/Mercurius was represented repeatedly on many a fulsome title-page as the patron of all the arts and professions.

Commentators frequently note how many activities and traits are encompassed in accounts of trickster figures. They often see in the multiple aspects features of the ordinary *human* condition as opposed to the specializations of the shaman or the creative High God/Goddess. Wallis Budge can only make sense of all the activities of Thoth, Hermes’ closest Egyptian counterpart, by asking us to “remember that according to the Egyptian texts Thoth was the heart, i.e., the mind, and reason, and understanding of the [highest] god Râ” (1904: 1/415; cf. Derrida 1981: Part I.3).

But it seems important to resist the typically Apollonian rationality whose logical condensation would drive us toward recognizing only *one* “essence of Hermes.” It may be important to retain openness toward the polymorphous prolixity of the ways this deity flashes in and out of human consciousness. I suspect that often we fail to gain from figures of antiquity and other cultures precisely what they can best contribute,

namely a balance to our obsessive singularity and specialization. We must be wary of the implicit *monotheistic* longing instilled in us by the slant of our own cultural science and theology, lest we miss originaive *polytheisms* that may be useful to comprehend our ever-more-complex human condition.

The polytheism of the Greeks was an open-textured religiosity honoring various experiences of power made concrete by different members of the divine family. Its concern was not so much the definition or abstract identification of divine essences so much as providing a practical religion that connected humans with the relevant sources of power and clarified behaviors appropriate for human beings. The sharp differentiation between the human and the divine that was developed in Judaism and Christianity went against the Greek sense of a divine-human continuum. Greek mythology functioned less to develop theological dogmas than to clarify ethical behavior. It explored our all-too-human existence in the gap between what comes to us through history and fate or *luck*, and what we can learn through ethical and cultural training, or *education* (Nussbaum 1986 shows how this problem motivated many crucial reflections in Greek philosophy and literature).

In such a context we ought to scrutinize mythical figures whose interactions with and services to mortals are particularly emphasized. As the Greek "god most loving of humankind" (*Iliad* 24: 344–45), Hermes seems a foil for fallible humans as other Olympians could never be except when romanticized in Hellenistic and Alexandrian syncretisms. But he is recognized as *a god*, the only nymph's son who is, and there is something intriguing about the Greek spirit that could divinize such a figure of marginality and paradox, polyvalence and multiplicity, as easily as it idolized the sharp clear focus of a Zeus or Hera.

A marginal, border-dwelling figure, Hermes stirs up and initiates. He is not the deity of the singular heroic act, but of the marginal and plural subjectivities of tradition breakers, and metaphor makers.

## THE DIVINE CONNECTOR

The work of metaphor is the work of making connections between two or more fields, or as one might suggest in classical terms, it is the sphere of *the erotic*, since eros was primarily a matter of how people were

drawn to one another (and not just the matter of genital sexuality that “the erotic” has become). An intertwining series of images, Hermes will provide us with a range of types of human connection betokened by this trickster’s signature emblem, his staff.

Hermes is sighted as a peacemaker, as the patron of youths, flocks, and the lucky find, and as the original sacrificer or cook—in every case the emphasis is upon *connections* between humans, or between humans and deities. Sexual aspects of Hermes are as near to hand, and as phallic, as for other tricksters, especially in his graphic and plastic representations. At an early date the erect phallos alone served as a symbol of Hermes; it was carried forward onto the front of the shaft-plus-head that became the classic herm, as well as in *petit fours* shaped like male genitals, eaten on the god’s fourth-of-the-month feast days, and in polyphallic Mercuric door chimes in merchants’ shops in Pompeii.

But the phallos was hardly unique to Hermes in antiquity—compare the explicit phallicism of Dionysos’ Seilenoi, the satyrs, actors playing roles in classical Comedy, even secret objects in women’s mysteries—and I am not struck by a particularly erotic quality (in modern sexual terms) in either the literature or the visual representations of Hermes (see Keuls 1985). To be sure, quite a number of sexual liaisons are reported for the god (thirty-five women, four men), and he sired a number of children (about forty-four), but such activity is not unusual with respect to the ways the Greeks projected images of their male gods.

This trickster’s phallic history does not involve reduction in size, like that of the ass/youth in Lucian’s *Asinus*, or that of Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*, or that of the Winnebago trickster. Nor is it that of displacement, as when the African Eshu-Elegba’s rampant phallos becomes old Legba’s crooked walking-stick in Haitian Voodoo, although in some medieval illustrations phallic aspects clearly are displaced onto Hermes’ staff (*kérykeion*).

The *kérykeion* or caduceus is more broadly symbolic, and indeed it has received all sorts of mystagogic interpretations: “The wand represents power; the two snakes wisdom; the wings diligence. . . . The caduceus also signifies the integration of the four elements, the wand corresponding to the earth, the wings to air, the serpents to fire and water” (Cirlot 1971: 35).

The staff is a communicative device: one type, the Spartan *skytalê*, was a walking-stick marked by the sender of the message in such ways as to

identify the messenger and to remind him of the contents to be conveyed. It is also a device of leadership—the shepherd’s staff, the speaker’s *skeptron* in the agora, the tyrant’s scepter—and an agent of transformation, inasmuch as messages often have transformative power: note Aigeus’ suicide after he receives the false visual message about Theseus’ death. The staff has the power of magical transformation, and hence the *kérykeion* was ideally to be made of gold, and Hermes was described as shining-like-gold, gold-winged, and gold-wanded (*chrysophaês, chrysopteros, and chryorapis*).

Hermes was thought to function as a *peacemaker*, his staff functioning as the “blameless tool of peace” (Orphic Hymns, *To Hermes* 28.7) rather than the spear that the herald *festialis* hurled into enemy country as a declaration of war (Frazer 1929, comm. on Ovid, *Fasti* 4/155). Ovid refers to Hermes/Mercurius as an “arbiter of peace and war to gods above and gods below” (*Fasti* 5/665–66), and in Aristophanes’ *Peace*, Hermes helps disinter the buried Goddess of Peace. Even the usual folklore about looking at copulating snakes—such a sight is what made Teiresias blind—is reinterpreted in this light: “When Mercury, holding [the staff given him by Apollon], was journeying to Arcadia and saw two snakes with bodies intertwined, apparently fighting, he put down the staff between them. They separated then, and so he said that the staff had been appointed to bring peace. Some, in making caducei, put two snakes intertwined on the rod, because this seemed to Mercury a bringer of peace.”<sup>4</sup> An anonymous literary papyrus represents Hermes as ending the primeval conflict between the four elements, creating from them the sky and the earth—a motif of normative establishment of characteristics of the present world that is found in stories of several other tricksters (see the third section of this essay).

A story in Plato’s *Protagoras* concerns Hermes’ role in pacifying fighting humans rather than snakes or the elements: when primitive human-kind seemed about to destroy itself, “for they had not the art of politics,” Zeus “sent Hermes to impart to men the qualities of respect for others and a sense of justice, so as to bring order into our cities and create a bond of friendship and union” (Hamilton and Cairns 1961, translation of Plato, 322 b & c). These qualities were to be distributed to all persons, in contrast to the few who practiced the arts and crafts (in the Aesopic tradition the latter were held to have received a drug of falsehood, Perry 1965: 103). “Gentle” or “pacifying” (*meilichos*) Hermes lifts his rod to

check the fray among the gods in Nonnos (36: 108), resulting in “an end to the gods’ intestine strife” (188), and he sees to the “mingling of a league of friendship” between Dionysos and Perseus at the end of the *Dionysiaca* (47: 713).

We begin to see why the Roman traditions emphasized the role of hermetic peacemaker (the career of Augustus is treated by Horace, *Odes* 1, 2: 25–46, as an epiphany of Mercurius), as well as something of the Greek horror at the mutilation of the Athenian herms in 415 B.C.E., during the Peloponnesian War, for it had been precisely those aspects of the Hermes cult having to do with peaceful interactions that had been emphasized during Hipparchos’ rule (Eitrem 1912: 783; on the period, see Brown 1947: ch. 6; and for a fresh interpretation of the castration of the herms, see Keuls 1985: chaps. 1 and 16).

At regular intervals on highways, mile-markers or distance signposts took the form of herms. Furthermore, in their function as boundary markers and as directional pointers to towns and springs herms facilitated peaceful commerce, traveling, and communication among all sorts of people. In contrast to Ares, Hermes was never markedly associated with warfare or military activities, which disrupt such peaceful communications.

Hermes’ associations with Eros, the personified principle of connect-edness, betoken phallic expression in its nurturing dimension, seen in Hermes’ patronage of youth, his role as god of flocks, and his creative and artistic application of the lucky find. Indeed Hermes’ activities suggest a fostering of associations and relationships, a collecting of people for commerce or for political action (the herald’s task) or for education or athletics. Whereas Eros is “hot” or “wild,” his “generative arrows” wounding even Zeus, Hermes is “agreeable” and “good-natured,” and he facilitates but does not force connections. He fathers Pan (or Pans: five such sons are mentioned) and two sons named Eros (one by Aphrodite, one by Artemis), as well as satyrs (such as Pherespondes and Poimenios), Hermaphroditos, and Priapos—these figures extrapolate the god’s more aggressive eroticism.

It is useful when studying a body of mythology to scrutinize any cross-referencing connections and relationships within mythic family structures. In this context, that means looking carefully at the emphatic pairing of Hermes with his brother Apollon, “the dark” with “the light.” In the Homeric Hymn *To Hermes*, the two first connect through the

results of Hermes' magic and trickery and then in fraternal friendship, after the two gods have defined their respective limits and spheres of acting: "Thus lord Apollon showed his love for the son of Maia with every kind of affection."<sup>5</sup> Subsequently the two are paired repeatedly, in many contexts.

Once his place in the divine family is established, Hermes turns toward mortals, as when he assists heroes. He conveys messages from Olympos to Aigisthos, Atreus, Deukalion, Kalypso, Priamos, and Tros; he takes messages into the underworld, and across continents. Above all he is the intermediary who links deities and humans by inventing sacrifice, which serves to bring together members of the politico-religious community. And since the ancient herald might also officiate at sacrifices, having previously prepared the meat, that function developed into the role of cook, and we learn that kitchen implements were dedicated to the herald-cook Hermes. It is he who introduces Ganymedes to the supreme delight of the Olympian cuisine, *nektar* (Lucian 4: 5).

Hermes also links together both deities and mortals by transporting them for the explicit purpose of erotic conjunctions: Alkmene to Rhadamanthys, Aphrodite to a love affair with Otreus, Eurydike to Orpheus, Ganymedes to Zeus, Helena to Alexandros, and Psyche to Eros. In Roman comedy he becomes explicitly a *leno*, a procurer, a role played for Hermes himself by his father when Zeus steals Aphrodite's sandal as a means of leading her to Hermes' bed.<sup>6</sup>

Hermes' roles show that connectedness comes not just from sexuality but also from peaceful social intercourse, business, religion, travel, education, athletics, politics, and even magic (see Doty 1978b).

## CREATOR-RESTORER-HEALER

Trickster analysts have argued whether tricksters are prosocial benefactors and creators or merely negative characters indicating a deity opposed to or in tension with a "high god" creator. Some consider the trickster to represent parody of the religious shaman. Hermes functions as a *creator* deity only tangentially, although many traditions ascribe to him the functions of the figure known as the culture-bringer: such functions include the invention or discovery of the practical use of fire

and how to kindle it by means of (phallic) fire sticks, the institution of sacrifice,<sup>7</sup> writing and the letters of the alphabet,<sup>8</sup> the institution of libraries, astronomy (his planet was called Hermaon or Hermes, Mercury), the musical scale, divining, the arts and sports of the gymnasium and palaestra, hunting, weights and measures, coins and finances, the clearing and paving of highways, crafts and commerce, and the cultivation of olive trees. He fashioned the first lyre, which he gave not only to Apollon, but also to Amphion, in which case it was crucial to the creation of the walls of Thebes as a sort of enacted musical architecture—the city was characterized as *lyrodmêtos*, lyrebuilt, and Hermes received the epithet *lyraios*.

His association with speech and language is emphasized in the neo-Platonic conceit that he parceled out tongues when human beings were created (as well as brains, the same amount to each—hence large persons who need more brain-substance are stupid: Aesop, see Perry 1965: 108), and the tongues of sacrificial victims were dedicated to him. In one tradition he gives Pandora her voice; and curse formulae call upon him to “bind the tongue” of—hence to immobilize—the victim, just as erotic charms seek his or Aphrodite’s skills in “whispering” effectively into the ears of the beloved (he earns the epithet *psithyros*, “the whisperer”).

The list of inventions could be extended, but the Greek “first-finder” traditions are notoriously slippery and duplicative, and always slanted from the perspective of the cult transmitting them. Even the discovery of fire is more usually ascribed to Prometheus’ theft. What seem more typically trickster-ish than his creations and inventions are Hermes’ *corrections and restorations*, often performed at the behest of another deity, in which he enables humans to reunite or to move to a higher level of awareness or insight. These are similar to the common trickster motif of making the cosmos more habitable for humankind. For example the Winnebago trickster relocates a waterfall so that people can live where it had been: “I am telling you,” Trickster says, “that the earth was made for man to live on and you will annoy him if you stay here. I came to this earth to rearrange it” (Radin 1955: 52).

Typically the trickster helps humans adjust by stipulating social boundaries, even if he does so by metonymically transgressing them. He brings symbolic organization to the personal universe by his many exploits of disassociation: his arms, which initially fight one another, get

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organized into the primal right vs. left cooperation; his intestines are tied efficiently into the body at the anus; his long trailing penis is shortened until it becomes more manageable and does not have to be carried around in a box or basket. Likewise Hermes organizes the social cosmos, working out interconnections among people, boundaries between nations, and realignments of military or political power.<sup>9</sup>

Hermes also plays an important maieutic role—the term is from *maia*, midwife or nurse (personified in Hermes' mother Maia)—and he is termed a “male midwife” (Nonnos 41: 171) because he assists at unusual births and childhoods.<sup>10</sup> He is also a healer and physician, able like Priapos to cure impotence and acute fever; on an inscription he is named as a physician, and in the magical papyri he is paired with the goddess of health, Hygieia. The connection that we would expect would be with Asklepios, because of the symbol of the healing snakes that brought curative dreams; and indeed there is a tradition that Hermes rescued Koronis, pregnant with Asklepios, from the fires at Zeus' manifestation. The snakes in the iconography of Asklepios are similar to those on Hermes' caduceus, which is yet today the emblem of the medical profession.

Master of herbs, Hermes recommends the medicinal herb pennyroyal to Trygaios as a cure for overeating (Aristophanes, *Peace*, 712); he gives his name to the autumn crocus used in medicine, the *hermodactyl*; and he helps Odysseus escape from Kirke by use of the magical herb *moly*. He also knows poisons that cause evil dreams and lethargy.<sup>11</sup> Pausanias reports that he once saved Tanagra from pestilence by carrying a ram around the town's borders. Hermes sharpens Charon's sight (Lucian, *Charon*, 7) by means of an *epôdê*, a spell or charm or song—the *kêryx* had to be a good singer! And Seneca designates Hermes as the divine agent who relieves Claudius of his chronic flatulence (see Athanassakis 1977: 90).

## THE SHAMELESS ONE

In turning to the characteristics of *deceit*, *trickery*, and *thieving*, we encounter traits that characterize Hermes that would be shocking as divine traits in other religions. But religious tricksters are regularly famous for their deceitfulness, and what are sometimes self-assuredly

referred to as the “high religions” might learn from such a trait, inasmuch as there is a certain deceitfulness at the heart of all social institutions that may even be beneficial in hiding the unmentionable or indefinable mysteries and limitations at the core of human experience.

Unlike the North American tricksters, Hermes does not often get tricked in return, yet his stories suggest some revisionist consciousness, because Hermes punishes persons who act exactly as *he* might be expected to act in their stead!<sup>12</sup> So the “chatterbox” (Battos) who tries to make a profit from Apollon by squealing on Hermes, and from Hermes by promising not to, is turned into stone when Hermes finds him out. Aglauros, who accepts Hermes’ gold as the price for admitting him to the bedroom of her sister Herse, is likewise lithocized when she tries a hermetic word-game: “I shall not be moved,” she says, since she now wants both the gold and the handsome male god. “Right!” says Hermes, and turns her into a black stone doorstep. And on a herm by a field an inscription reads: “Hermes [the thief!] has made a new law against stealing” (Pallantine Anthology 193)—probably an earlier version of the theme that still recurs in various police dramas, “Set a thief to catch a thief.”

As is so often the case with other tricksters, Hermes’ deceits are often ultimately beneficent. He causes Alexandros at Troas to suppose that a phantom Helena is the real item, while Hermes removes her to safety in Egypt. Taking on the appearance of the absent Dionysos, Hermes summons the Bacchantes to battle with the “Indians” when they have lost all hope (Nonnos 35: 227–42). First the gods conceive of having him steal Hektor’s body, and then they arrange for him to accompany Priamos: Hermes pops up before Priamos like a young ephebic thief before the two steal through the Greek guards like a pair of robbers (*Iliad* 24: 24). Subsequently it is Hermes who carries the bribes (“gifts”) to persuade Achilleus, Hermes who coaches Priamos on how to act as a suppliant, and Hermes who later drives Priamos home with Hektor’s corpse.

Ovid suggests that Hermes “talked like a metronome for hours,” telling stories to Argos until the thousand-eyed monster slept, so that Hermes, after this narrative deceit, could kill him and thereby free Io. The poet Bakchylides suggests that: “Hermes could not / Outwit him in mornings,” but had to wait until his full power was attained in the dusk of evening (Godolphin 1964: 269). Another version has Hermes use a

golden net to trap the gadfly that was Hera's next punishment of Io for her liaison with Zeus. And in Apollodorus' account of the same story (2.2.3), Hermes is sent by Zeus *to steal* the heifer (see also Nonnos 1: 337).

Certainly Hermes attains positive results through his thieving: he is sent by Zeus to Tantalos to reclaim/steal his valuable watchdog that Pandareus had stolen from the Cretan sanctuary of Zeus and given to Tantalos for safekeeping (Apollodorus). And "with a robber's untracked footsteps," he steals Dionysos from the nursing nymphs after Hera has driven them mad (Nonnos 9: 52). Hera almost overtakes Hermes, who carries Dionysos "in his life-protecting bosom," but Hermes shams the appearance of Phanes, and escapes (141).

The connection between Hermes and thievery, while problematic from the standpoint of many modern religious traditions, was asserted in communal rituals in antiquity. From inscriptions we learn of a festival in Samos honoring Hermes the Joy-Giver, where thievery and pick-pocketing were permitted, and of a Cretan festival where sexual license prevailed, and master-servant roles were reversed, as generally at the various festivals of Hermes named *Hermaia*, one of which forms the setting for Plato's *Lysis*. Like the medieval Carnivals, these may have been occasions of a sort of preventative social medicine, venting the interpersonal tensions caused by the strictures of a highly stratified society.

## COMEDIAN AND WIT

That humor and laughter are part of the identikit of a divine trickster should not surprise us. Myths of several nations include comic figures, even stories of sexual improprieties, although they are usually suppressed as formal religious traditions are developed. Although scatological elements are not as prominent in the stories about Hermes as they are in other trickster collections, comic and playful elements are just as frequent. In fact Hermes is *the* playful Greek god, beginning with his cradle scene in the fourth Homeric Hymn, where first he whistles noisily while Apollon makes griping older-brother complaints (4: 280), then sneezes and drops "an impudent message" from his bowels down Apollon's spotless robe, when that very august presence has come to

accuse the baby of stealing his cattle (4: 295–96). Even the scene where Hermes invents sacrifice is ironically marked first by his ostentatious refusal to partake of the delicious-smelling roasts even though he is ravenously hungry, and then by his presumption in ritually setting out twelve portions—his own being the twelfth! (Brown 1947: chap. 6, tracks the religio-political significance of this scene).

The fourth Homeric Hymn, as close to a canonical account of Hermes' career as we might wish, is replete with comic traits, distinguishing it from the long hymns to other deities. The very first scene portrays the day-old baby *laughing*—a characteristic portent of the Miraculous Child—as he devises the lyre. Then Hermes spitefully hymns his own genealogy and theogony: he shamelessly explicates Zeus' dalliance with his nymph-mother Maia in such a way as “young men do / at the time of feasts when they taunt and mock each other” (4: 55–56, Athanassakis' translation).

Shortly thereafter, “yearning in his heart for new things,” he sets off to steal Apollon's cattle. Why Apollon's? Because Hermes knows that his brother will be less than diligent, since he is infatuated with Hymenaios, the young and handsome son of his own cowherd (not the same Hymenaios with whom Dionysos is infatuated in Nonnos). The baby-god's “crafty conceit” of reversing the hooves of his new cattle, and then making huge wicker skis to disguise his own steps, is pure farce, and a motif known elsewhere in antiquity. Returning home, he slips through the keyhole so that he can swear later, in self-defense, that he never *stepped over* the threshold; later the image of this never-too-literal deity was stamped onto housekeys.

The Homeric Hymn *To Hermes*, while extensive, is by no means exhaustive. We hear of additional tales from other sources: Hermes steals his mother's clothes while she is bathing. Hermes steals Apollon's bow and quiver when that noble god's attention is distracted by the music of the lyre. He fools Hera into becoming his foster-mother and hence his protectress, by disguising himself as her son Ares (the milk that sprays from her breasts as she pulls him away in disgust becomes the Milky Way; the mytheme is usually connected with Herakles, whom Hermes carries to the sleeping Hera). And Hermes invents the panpipes, later associated with one of his sons, the comic Pan.

Hermes' self-defense before the council of the gods on the charge of stealing Apollon's cattle leads Zeus to *laugh aloud*, as Apollon will later,

because of the older brother's delight in Hermes' lyre.<sup>13</sup> Earlier Hermes' music had soothed Apollon's anger at his younger brother's performance of magic, a scene that becomes a practical joke: after Apollon has fashioned fetters for Hermes out of willow shoots, Hermes causes them not only to drop off his own body, but rooting quickly (again we confront the hermetic motif of *swiftness*), to entwine and secure the cattle where Hermes wants them.

These are selected examples. Hermes almost always appears *unexpectedly* and in an unforeseen manner (*aproidês*); *ingenuously*: resolving a tiff among the gods with a joke about his being bested by Leto (*Iliad* 21: 498); *self-effacingly*: he complains in Aristophanes' *Peace*: "I have to watch the little things [the gods leave behind], / Pipkins and panikins and trencherlets"; and *impatiently*: "Mercury wastes no time," but speaks and then vanishes in midair (Virgil, *Aeneid* 4: 96). When Apollo and Mercury, out for a stroll, discover the beautiful Chione, Apollo "thought of meeting her that night," but Mercury "could not wait till evening came," and put her to sleep in his arms then and there (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11, Gregory's translation).

Hermes causes laughter at others' expense: as *philokertomos*, he "loves his jokes" or "is fond of jeering," as when he teases Aphrodite, who tries to compete with Athene in weaving (Nonnos 24: 296). Frequently the laughter brings a resolution to a tense situation: "All the Olympians smiled" (*ibid.*, 321). Hermes' own laughter often anticipates a later *connection or profit*: the scandalous situation where he and Apollon discuss how they would like to be trapped under Hephaistos' net where Ares and Aphrodite have been caught in their lovemaking (*Odyssey* 8: 339) prefigures Hermes' own union with Aphrodite. His laughter when he stumbles over the tortoise—he calls it "a lucky symbol" (Homeric Hymns 4: 28)—parallels his use of its shell, transformed by a sort of primal humorous *technê* into the lyre, as "a symbol" (or "token," *symbolon* in both instances) to placate Apollon later.

The hermetic laughter is crafty laughter—Hermes' play is not the casual play of little children. He is god of ephebes, athletes, not of the kindergarten, and childhood toys were dedicated to him when boys left childhood behind and entered higher studies. His play is the *serio lude* of the gymnasium, the serious work of leisure when the ephebes studied not only sports, but also letters, music/poetry, philosophy, law, and oratory.

Crafty laughter, but Hermes is also gentle and easygoing (*akakêsios* and *eukolos*), as he loves the mystery of appearing and disappearing, as well as the incognito: he shelters unrecognized with Zeus at the home of Baucis and Philemon, and with Zeus and Poseidon at the home of Hyreius. When Hyreius was granted a boon in return for his warm hospitality, and wished for a son, the three gods urinated on a bull hide they had commanded their host to lay on the ground. Nine months after it was buried in the earth, a male child came forth: Urion, a name later cosmetized to Orion.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that Hermes can be presented as such a ridiculous character as is portrayed by Aristophanes, and later by Aesop and Lucian, seems to indicate that this was a deity who was imagined to be especially close to ordinary human lives. Hence comedy and satire were more appropriate for the development of his character than the more elevated genres of tragedy or lyric (Pindar is an exception, but even he revises the genre freely to suit the situation).

No doubt the pronounced connection between Hermes *Chthonios* or *Psychopompos* (in either case, stressing his guiding of the shades of the dead) and the realms of the Underworld added a certain reserve to the picture. But even that link gains comic lightness, as when Hermes, employed as a sort of tourist guide to Hades, shows Menippus the bare skull of Helena, and Menippus quips: "Well! Is *this* what launched a thousand ships from every part of Greece?" (Lucian 18: 2).

"Graveyard humor," perhaps, but it is a humor that is also soul-humor, humor of the psyches Hermes guides to and from the world-beyond. Even there, we are to suppose, there will be arguments about who owes whom what (Hermes and Charon arguing over repair bills for the ferryboat, in Lucian's *Charon*). And wit may be a *pharmakon* (preventative medicine) with which to confront death: Sisyphos comes again "into the light of the sun [from Hades] by means of his manifold wits" (Theognis 702–12).

It is through Hermes that we find hints that the Other Place will involve new discoveries and joys: in Apuleius' *Amor and Psyche*, Mercury guides Psyche herself to Olympos, and in his role as divine cup-bearer, tenders her a cup of ambrosia. After her earthly career, she is wedded to Amor (Eros), all the divine family enjoying the wedding breakfast. The child of their union was, we are told, Voluptas: pleasure/delight/enjoyment.

## THE HERMENEUT

Before we look at some of the general contributions that analysis of the figure of Hermes makes to trickster studies, one aspect of the classical Hermes remains to be discussed here, and that is his role as messenger-hermeneut or interpreter. There is an ancient connection between herald Hermes and *hermeneuein*, the verb for practice of the art of hermeneutics or interpretation, which is intensified in post-classical ties between Mercurius and *eloquentia*. Hermes carries messages from one person or deity to another; he does not always originate them, and he may select or adapt what he alone chooses to present, and when. As the divine messenger, he participates in the formidable creative power of Zeus as its facilitator, as the one who provides for bringing into language what was only potential.

Already as a baby he “pondered word and deed at once” (Homeric Hymns 4: 46). He remains *facundus*, “wise of tongue” (Horace, *Odes* 1: 10), the speaker who accompanies his lover Peitho/Persuasion even so far as Hades (Aischylos, *The Libation Bearers* 726–27), and whose daughter is Angelias, the teller of glad tidings (Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 8: 81–82).

Hermes elicits metaphoric insights that startle the recipients of his maieutic messages into action, but he guides them as he guided the aged Priamos: he escorts one to the confrontation, but the subsequent interpretations that lead to modes of behavior, the details of the necessary actions, are not explicit. He brings Odysseus the efficacious herb *moly* to safeguard him against Kirke’s wiles (a magical contest of wits, appropriate to the grandson of Hermes), but “crafty” Odysseus still has to figure out on his own when to use it and how to plan his eventual escape. Hermes helps Perseus avoid the petrifying sight of Medusa’s face, and he helps Herakles distinguish between the real Underworld dangers and the Gorgon’s apparently real “empty image” (*kenon eidolon*) there, but subsequently each hero has to act on his own.

Hermes-hermeneut is an arbitrary figure, in that he is not subject to the control of mortals. Hence one prays for clarifications or improvements “if he wills it” (see Aischylos, *The Libation Bearers* 811), and there is a chance-y element in all hermeneutical interpretation: sometimes the interpreter makes the right choice and intuits the correct solutions, and sometimes she or he does not. Words themselves both express and disguise the meanings they create. Nor are there guarantees that the

messages are properly or fully stated, as marked by Hermes' promise "never to tell lies, but not necessarily the whole truth," or that we hear them appropriately. Like revelations, hermetic messages confirm or disconfirm themselves only in retrospect, and no less a figure than the elevated Apollon fears that Hermes "might steal back my lyre and the curved bow" (Homeric Hymns 4.544), indicating that even the gods' messages to one another might be deceitful or misunderstood.

In contrast to Apollon's sweeping oracular powers, Hermes' are limited: Apollon grants him the power of minor fortune-telling by means of pebbles, lots, or the archaic mantic bees (see Scheinberg 1979). And these powers may be fragmentary or partial: there was a market oracle where persons stopped up their ears, asked a question, and then took the first words heard when their ears were unstopped to be Hermes' answer.<sup>15</sup> But in hermetic foretelling, as in politics or commerce, there is always a risky element of chance, the possibility one has been led astray by what one desires to hear, and the danger that the god's real messages will be treated only as obtrusive, unreal fantasies.

Hermes inspires (Dido, in the *Aeneid*; later the bringing of inspiration was a central alchemical activity of Mercurius), but he does not specify particular reactions or applications of the message. He provides a language for transitions and discoveries (the "Eureka!" experience of the inventor, poet, initiate), but he does not guarantee their value, or their universality. The hermetic find may bring riches or failure. Kerényi suggests: "Accidental discovery is in itself not yet quite Hermetic: it is merely the stuff of Hermetic activity, which is then shaped to the meaning of the gods" (1976: 24). The lucky find (*hermaion*) can become "Hermes' lot" (*Hermou klêros*), the direct hit in games, or the first and best portion in serving meals, only when the randomly encountered opportunity has been worked into a meaningful context. And then it is still "half-shares with Hermes" (*koinos Hermes*)—said when coming upon a lucky find, but which might best be interpreted in this context as "half luck and half elbow grease."

If Hermes models a hermeneutic, it is an open-ended finding of new meanings that may change interpretive force from one context to another; the values of a way-god must necessarily be flexible and adaptive. It is a hermeneutic that perceives merit within deceit—the bag of gold coins that Hermes carries in late vase paintings—within the "Cunning tales of double meaning / Twisted council, clever word!"<sup>16</sup> And it is an

aesthetic hermeneutic: Hermes bears epithets marking him as the male leader of the female nymphs, Charities, Graces, or Muses;<sup>17</sup> he has a deep appreciation of the beauty of Kalympso's home (*Odyssey* 5: 59–75). Appropriately enough, it was only *the most handsome* of the ephebes who enacted his role at Tanagra (Pausanias 9: 22.1–2). And Hermes was the patron of crafts: the “hermoglyphic *techne*” was the art of a sculptor, the phrase “Hermes in the stone,” a reference to the potential shape that the artist might discover within the raw materials.

Without specifying a regulative list of trickster traits, I have explored here, and could explore further, many characteristics that Hermes shares with other trickster figures. They include: magical elements, playful, clownlike aspects, and athletics; the modeling of extreme types of human behavior; the connecting of many of the components of higher culture in order to transform “nature” (the traces of the cows Hermes sacrificed are said to be visible on rocks yet today); zoomorphic aspects (the cock, the ram, the ibis—Eitrem 1912: 757–59 lists fifteen animals associated with Hermes); thievery and deceit as normal modes of appearing; wanderlust (god of the ways, roads, travelers); connections with the realm of the dead, souls, or ghosts, and the underworld; eroticism, especially phallicism; age and gender multiplicity; and involvement in setting limits and boundaries. On an even more abstract level of analysis we might point to social catharsis, symbolic inversion, multiplicity of representation and transformation, and close relationship to the feminine.

In addition to these shared features, the complex trickster Hermes is also a messenger/herald/guide; a god of dreams, education, oratory, law, the servant professions; the slayer of Argos; and the divine worker by chance, change, and luck. He is related also to crafts and commerce: Hermes' Greek epithet *emporikos* went into Latin and then, as *emporium*, into English; the base *emporos* means either merchant or traveler; note also the relationship in Latin between Mercurius and *mercator*, “to engage in commerce,” as reflected in the adjective *mercantile*.

The range of features almost overwhelms, yet it reminds us how frequently our obsession with monochromatic simplicity and easily accessible handbooks has desiccated deities by slotting them into overly simplified theological pantheons. One of Kerényi's grandest insights is: “Speaking mythologically, each God is the source of a world that with-

out him remains invisible, but with him reveals itself in its own light" (1976: 55). I take that statement to mean that we confront a pantheon in each deity, as well as that each deity "pantheonizes" all the others within his/her own contours. But that perspective itself may be the insight one must learn precisely through the trickster's ways of playing through individual mythostories, the delicate opportunism of Singer's "sense of proportion about ourselves" with which this essay began.