

THE GODS IN THE NARRATIVES OF THE HOMERIC HYMNS

Andrew Faulkner

The gods and goddesses of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are essential cogs in the narrative machinery of the two Homeric epics, characters to be taken seriously as divinities in their interactions with each other and the mortals of the epic world.¹ Semi-divine warriors must contend with the actions and decisions of their immortal counterparts: near the outset of the *Iliad*, the arrows of Apollo take revenge upon the Greek army for the dishonor shown to Chryses by Agamemnon, while the schemes of Hera, even her humorous seduction of Zeus in Book 14, change the course of the war as much as they contrast with the deadly seriousness of the battlefield. In the *Odyssey*, the displeasure of Poseidon hinders Odysseus' return home whereas Athena provides patronage essential to the resumption of his place on Ithaca. And yet, despite their central roles in the narrative, the gods and goddesses are not the primary focus of the Homeric poems, which begin with an invocation to the Muse to sing of mortal characters and their agency.

The Homeric hymns, a collection of thirty-three hexameter hymns,² turn the spotlight upon the divine plane. In their hymnic structure, the poems are differentiated from epic: they name a divinity as the object of song in their first lines and take leave at the end with a direct second-person address to the god or goddess.³ In the longer hymns, not only are the chief characteristics and powers of the divinity celebrated in a concise attributive section, but third-person narratives recount a pivotal moment in the life of the god or goddess, often including birth, which leads to the assumption of characteristic functions and abilities.⁴ The second hymn (495 lines) tells of the abduction of Demeter's daughter Persephone and her marriage to Hades, the third (546 lines) recounts Apollo's birth and the foundation of his cult at Delphi, the fourth (580 lines) narrates Hermes' birth, his precocious theft of Apollo's cattle, and his reconciliation with his brother, while the fifth hymn (293 lines) tells of Zeus' revenge upon Aphrodite for inciting him to sleep

1 See the classic treatment of Griffin 1980: 144–78, who counters earlier views that the Homeric gods lack *numen* or are mere diversions from the central narrative.

2 On the ordering and formation of the collection see Torres-Guerra 2003, Faulkner 2011b with bibliography.

3 See Strauss Clay 2011: 235–6. As she points out, even when the hymns call upon the Muse in the epic manner (e.g. *h.Ven.*, *h.Hom.* 19) the deity is the explicit object of song. The hymns frequently begin with the formula 'I begin to sing of' (ἀρχομαι αἰεῖδεν), with the name of the divinity the first word in the poem.

4 On the structure of the hymns and the distinction between attributive and narrative sections, see Janko 1981, Bremer 1981, Calame 2005: 19–22.

with mortals, a revenge that leads her to seduce the mortal Anchises and conceive the child Aeneas. According to a plausible reconstruction of the first hymn to Dionysus, a now fragmentary poem whose original length reached over 400 lines, the narrative section related the reception of Dionysus on Olympus through his release of Hera bound by her son Hephaestus.⁵ The more modestly sized seventh hymn (59 lines) recounts the abduction of Dionysus by pirates and the god's fearsome epiphany, while the nineteenth hymn (49 lines) tells of Pan's mountain wanderings and, through an inset hymn, of his birth and assumption on Olympus. Mortals play roles within these narratives as divinities interact with them: Demeter visits the house of Celeus in Eleusis (*h.Cer.* 91–304), Apollo establishes Cretan sailors as his priests at Delphi (*h.Ap.* 388–544), Hermes and Apollo encounter an old man at Onchestus (*h.Merc.* 87–93, 187–212), and Aphrodite seduces the mortal Anchises, who plays the most prominent mortal role within the hymns. Nevertheless, in contrast to the Homeric epics, the gods and their activities remain the overt focus of these hymnic narratives.

This divine perspective binds the Homeric hymns closely to the Hesiodic *Theogony* with its account of the birth of the gods, Zeus' establishment of control over the pantheon, and the creation of mankind in the myths of Prometheus and Pandora. Indeed, on one reading, the *Theogony* not only opens with a hymnic celebration of the Muses (1–114), a *prooimion* with subject matter distinct from the rest of the poem, but with an initial appeal to the Muses which is a 'subordinate part of the main endeavor: a long hexameter narrative hymn whose subject is the genealogy of the gods from the first beginnings to the present day world order.'⁶ There are nonetheless differences between the god-centered narratives of the Homeric hymns and Hesiod's *Theogony*. As Strauss Clay has argued influentially, the myths of the longer Homeric hymns are only fully understood against the background of Hesiod's theogonic myth and in relation to the pantheon of Homeric epic:

The Homeric poems show us the fully perfected and stable Olympian pantheon in its interaction with the Heroes; the *Theogony* reveals the genesis of the Olympian order and ends with the triumphal accession to power of Zeus. Between theogonic poetry and epic there remains a gap, one that is filled by the Olympian narratives of the longer hymns.⁷

The godly world of the Homeric hymns thus occupies a mythological middle position, one in which Zeus is newly established in his control of the pantheon, but in which the gods and goddesses beneath him are in a phase of formation or re-ordering, vying with him and each other for their own powers and functions (τιμαί) within the structure of Zeus' supreme rule. The Homeric epics, in contrast,

5 West 2001.

6 Furley 2011: 210–12.

7 Strauss Clay 1989: 15, who argues that the Homeric hymns, despite their differences, have a generic coherence. Cf. Strauss Clay 2011 and, on the shorter *h.Hom.* 28 to Athena, Felson 2011: 262–71.

present a more developed Olympian order, in which the roles of the gods and goddesses subordinate to Zeus are already set.⁸

The narrative presence of Zeus in the Homeric hymns is itself different than in both Hesiod and the Homeric epics, where he appears front and center as victor and director of the action. In the Homeric hymns, too, Zeus and his designs are continuously present in the background as drivers of the plot: it is by his will that Persephone is abducted by Hades (Διὸς βουλήσι, *h.Cer.* 9) and against him that Demeter mounts a challenge; he casts desire for the mortal Anchises into the heart of Aphrodite (*h.Ven.* 45); he is father to Apollo and Hermes and acts as arbitrator between them (*h.Merc.* 313–575); he presides over Apollo's entry into Olympus (*h.Ap.* 186–206) and Apollo sets up his oracle at Delphi to announce his father's will to mankind (*h.Ap.* 132, 252, 292). Despite this, direct access to the voice of Zeus is minimal in the Homeric hymns.⁹ In the Homeric epics, with an amount of direct speech similar to that in Homeric hymns,¹⁰ Zeus addresses the gods in direct speech with frequency and at length. In Hesiod, direct speech makes up only a small proportion of the lines, but Zeus' voice features in several of the limited exchanges in the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*.¹¹ In contrast, across the four longest Homeric hymns (hymns 2–5), Zeus has only three lines of direct speech, in *h.Merc.* 330–2, when he addresses Apollo, a strikingly limited amount for a narrative in which Zeus performs the role of arbitrator between Hermes and Apollo.¹² Otherwise, Zeus' speech is lacking altogether or reported indirectly, as the gods beneath Zeus take center stage.¹³ In several instances, the hymns provide a platform for divinities seldom mentioned in the Homeric epics, such as Demeter and Dionysus, whose invisibility in Homer has been attributed to their 'non-heroic' roles.¹⁴ However, other subjects of the hymns, such as Apollo or Aphro-

8 The gods of the epics may disagree with Zeus, but his power is never really threatened and the gods operate within established parameters; see Strauss Clay 1989: 11.

9 See further Faulkner 2015.

10 Direct speech makes up 45% of the *Iliad* (7,018 of 15,690 lines) and 67% of the *Odyssey* (8,225 of 12,103, including Odysseus' direct speech in Books 9–12): figures from Griffin 1986: 36–7. In the hymns, *h.Cer.* contains 39% (192 of 495), *h.Ap.* 32% (175 of 546), *h.Merc.* 48% (277 of 580), and *h.Ven.* 57% (168 of 293).

11 *Theogony*: Muses (26–28), Gaea and Cronus (164–6, 170–2), Zeus and Prometheus (543–4, 548–9, 559–60), Zeus and the Hundred-Handers (644–53, 655–63), amounting to no more than 3.8% of the entire poem (34 of 900–1,020 lines); *Works and Days*: Zeus and Prometheus (54–8), hawk and nightingale (207–11), imagined command to workers (503), in total 1.3% of the poem (11 of 828 lines).

12 Many editors have assumed a lacuna in the middle of Apollo's speech at *h.Merc.* 568 and a switch to indirect speech by Zeus, based upon the abrupt switch to accusative and infinitive. Such a switch, however, is paralleled elsewhere in early epic and there is good reason to suppose that Apollo's speech continues to line 573. See Richardson 2010, Vergados 2013 ad loc.

13 A possible exception to this is *h.Hom.* 1 to Dionysus. The final lines of the poem preserved in the Leiden manuscript (BPG 33H) and in *P.Oxy.* 670 contain direct speech by Zeus: on the reconstruction of the latter, see West 2001: 5–8. It is impossible, however, to extrapolate from these few lines the extent of his direct speech across the rest of the poem.

14 Kirk 1990: 173. Demeter in Homer: *Il.* 5.500–1 (simile), 13.322, 21.76 (in the formula Δημήτερος ἄκτῆ of food), *Od.* 5.125–7 (lover of Iasion). Dionysus in Homer: *Il.* 6.130–40 (tale of

dite, play active roles in the epics. There is notably no long narrative Homeric hymn to Zeus.¹⁵

The tales recounted about these gods and goddesses in the hymns have certain commonalities. Birth narratives and the deeds of adolescence are standard elements in the hymns addressed to Zeus' children or gods of subsequent generations, such as the long poems to Apollo and Hermes,¹⁶ *h.Hom.* 19 to Pan, and *h.Hom.* 28 to Athena. On the other hand, the two long hymns to Demeter and Aphrodite, the former a contemporary of Zeus and the latter of an older generation according to one popular tradition,¹⁷ treat the recalibration of previously established relationships and functions. In the *Hymn to Demeter* the struggles of adulthood and adolescence are combined in the mother-daughter pair of Demeter and Persephone, who are united in their defiance of Zeus' will. Another standard element of these hymnic narratives is the description of the god's epiphany to humans.¹⁸ The long hymns might also, for example, be divided into two pairs according to their overall tone: those to Hermes and Aphrodite have a humorous or light-hearted touch, as befits those two deities, while the hymns to Demeter and Apollo take on a more solemn tone in recounting the foundation of important cult sites. There is ultimately, despite certain similarities and generic cohesion, no single formula for the god-centered myths of the Homeric hymns, but one can nonetheless speak of a recognizable framework, however flexible, within which the narratives of the hymns praise and celebrate the gods and goddesses of the pantheon.

Lycurgus), 14.325 (son of Semele), *Od.* 11.325 (lover of Ariadne), 24.74 (donor of a golden amphora to Thetis).

- 15 *h.Hom.* 23 to Zeus consists of only four lines limited to attributive praise and hymnic farewell. Callimachus seems to point to, and rectify this gap by beginning his own Hellenistic collection of hexameter hymns with a poem addressed to Zeus. See Haslam 1993: 115, Petrovic in this volume.
- 16 Birth narratives also formed part of the myth of *h.Hom.* 1; see West 2001.
- 17 Although Aphrodite is in *h.Ven.* named three times with the formula 'Aphrodite daughter of Zeus' (Διὸς θυγάτηρ Ἀφροδίτη, 81, 107, 191), reflective of the tradition of her birth from Zeus and Dione known in the Homeric epics (*Il.* 3.374, *Od.* 8.308, 320), this is entirely absent at the outset of the poem, where the metrically equivalent formula 'laughter-loving Aphrodite' is used (φιλομμειδῆς Ἀφροδίτη 17, 49, 56, 65 and later 155). Nothing is said of her birth beyond the formula. Aphrodite's status as Zeus' daughter is thus not consistently or strongly marked in the poem, where her portrayal as a mature goddess who has in the past dominated Zeus (34–9) is suggestive also of the Hesiodic tradition. According to *Theogony* 188–206, Aphrodite is of an older generation than Zeus, born from the genitals (μήδεα) of Uranus when they drop into the ocean; this explains the epithet φιλομμειδῆς (δτι μηδέων ἐξεφαάνθη, 200). The Aphrodite of the hymn might be said to occupy a middle position between these two traditions. Boedeker 1974: 36–7 suggests that the introduction of the formula 'Aphrodite daughter of Zeus' serves to underscore Zeus' dominance over Aphrodite; cf. Strauss Clay 1989: 200.
- 18 This feature is not, however, as obvious in the *Hymn to Hermes*. On epiphanies in the Homeric hymns see Turkeltaub 2003; on the presentation of epiphany in *h.Merc.* and *h.Bacch.*, see Vergados 2011, Jaillard 2011.

DEMETER AND APOLLO

The second hymn celebrates not only Demeter, whose name occupies the first position in the poem, but also her daughter, Persephone/Core, whose abduction by Hades initiates the narrative portion of the poem (*h.Cer.* 1–3):

Δήμητρ' ἠΰκομον σεμνήν θεὸν ἄρχοι' ἀείδειν
αὐτὴν ἠδὲ θύγατρα τανίσφυρον, ἣν Αἰδωνεύς
ἦρπασεν, δῶκεν δὲ βαρύκτυπος εὐρύσοπα Ζεύς.

Of Demeter the lovely-haired, the august goddess first I sing, of her and her slender-ankled daughter, whom Aidoneus seized by favor of heavy-booming wide-sounding Zeus.¹⁹

The dual tribute reflects the close association of mother and daughter in both myth and cult. The poet proceeds to recount Demeter's search and mourning for her daughter, her anger at Zeus' involvement in Persephone's abduction, the famine Demeter brings upon mankind in her anger, and the resolution of this anger and her reunification with her daughter, who will henceforth spend one third of the year with her new husband in the underworld. At the center of this story is an extended section telling of Demeter's visit to Eleusis during her mourning (91–304): she goes to the house of Celeus and Metaneira disguised as an old woman and nurses their son Demophon. When she is interrupted by Metaneira during a ritual to make Demophon immortal, she finally reveals herself and her mysteries to the Eleusinians. This section, in which Demeter makes an epiphany and instructs mortals in her rites, may reflect close ties to Eleusinian cult, a possibility that has been much debated: details such as Demeter's fasting and bearing of torches, or her drinking of the *kykeon* to break her fast (210), suggest knowledge of cult practice.²⁰ Even if one emphasizes the Panhellenic aspects of the myth, as has Strauss Clay in her reading of the poem, according to which the hymn 'may be understood as an attempt to integrate, and hence absorb the cult of Demeter and the message of Eleusis into the Olympian cosmos,' the consistent presence of Demeter's anger across the narrative and the cultic elements of her visit to Eleusis bring a solemn tone to the goddess' portrayal.²¹ She is already in the first line 'august' (σεμνή), as are both she and Persephone at the end of the poem (σεμναί τ' αἰδοῖαί τε, 486), and the established mysteries 'that are not to be revealed' (σεμνά, τά τ' οὐ πως ἔστι παρεξίμεν οὔτε πυθέσθαι, 478). The somber tone of mystery, revelation, and anger is similarly present in Persephone's abduction and marriage. At the outset, she plucks a narcissus that shines as a wonder and provokes awe in all who see it (θαυμαστὸν γανόωντα, σέβας τό γε πᾶσιν ιδέσθαι, 10). Hades, while announcing to Persephone the privileges she will enjoy, brings up the punishment that will await those mortals who do not propitiate her (τῶν δ' ἀδικησάντων τίσις ἔσσειται ἤματα πάντα, / οἳ κεν μὴ θυσίησι τεὸν μένος ἰλάσκωνται, 368–9). The

19 Translations of the Homeric hymns, here and below, from West 2003a.

20 See, e.g., Richardson 1974: *passim*. Clinton 1986 and 1992 has argued against a close association between the poem and Eleusis, but see Parker 1991 and Richardson 2011.

21 Strauss Clay 1989: 202–66 (quote from 265), who argues that the poem narrates a restriction of Demeter's power under Zeus' rule.

young Persephone rejoices at the news of her future privileges (γήθησεν, 370), a childish reaction in stark contrast to the seriousness of the preceding warning for humans. The narrative has a happy side, as mother and daughter are reunited (*h. Cer.* 434–7):

ὣς τότε μὲν πρόπαν ἤμαρ ὁμόφρονα θυμὸν ἔχουσαι
πολλὰ μάλ' ἀλλήλων κραδίην καὶ θυμὸν ἴαινον
ἀμφαγαπαζόμεναι, ἀχὼν δ' ἀπεπαύετο θυμός·
γηθοσύνας δὲ δέχοντο παρ' ἀλλήλων ἔδιδόν τε.

So they then all day long, at one in their feelings, greatly warmed each other's hearts with embraces, and assuaged their sorrows, giving each other joy and receiving it.

But as Richardson has pointed out, 'the seriousness of death is not avoided. Just as Demophon must die, so too Persephone must still spend a third of the year with Hades, as ruler of the dead.'²² The extended narrative about Demeter and Persephone also provides the first extended treatment of Hades as a mythological character. In Homer, 'Hades' is chiefly the unpersonified abode of the dead, anthropomorphized in only a limited way: *Iliad* 15.187–93 describes, as part of the backstory, how Hades drew lots with his brothers for the threefold division of the world. In Hesiod he is mentioned as the brother of Zeus, and we hear of the abduction of Persephone briefly (*Th.* 912–14), but it is only in the hymnic narrative that the details of this story are fleshed out. The god-centered narratives of the hymns also gives space to relate the extended myth of other divine characters. One might compare, for example, the short narrative of the pursuit of Hestia by Apollo and Poseidon in the *Hymn to Aphrodite* (21–32):

οὐδὲ μὲν αἰδοίη κούρη ἄδεν ἔργ' Ἀφροδίτης
Ἴστίη, ἦν πρότην τέκετο Κρόνος ἀγκυλομήτης,
αὐτίς δ' ὀπλοτάτην βουλήϊ Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο,
πότνια, ἦν ἐμῶντο Ποσειδάων καὶ Ἀπόλλων·
ἦ δὲ μάλ' οὐκ ἔθελεν, ἀλλὰ στερεῶς ἀπέειπεν,
ὄμοσε δὲ μέγαν ὄρκον, ὃ δὴ τετελεσμένος ἐστίν,
ἀναμένη κεφαλῆς πατρὸς Διὸς αἰγιόχοιο,
παρθένος ἔσσεσθαι πάντ' ἤματα δῖα θεάων.
τῇ δὲ πατὴρ Ζεὺς δῶκε καλὸν γέρας ἀντι γάμοιο,
καὶ τε μέσφ' οἴκῳ κατ' ἄρ' ἔζετο πῖαρ ἐλοῦσα,
πᾶσιν δ' ἐν νηοῖσι θεῶν τιμάσχος ἐστίν
καὶ παρὰ πᾶσιν βροτοῖσι θεῶν πρέσβειρα τέτυκται.

Nor yet do the doings of Aphrodite appeal to the modest maiden Hestia, the first child of crooked-schemer Cronus, and also the youngest, through the designs of goat-rider Zeus; this lady was courted by Poseidon and Apollo, but she was not willing, she firmly refused them, and swore a great oath (which has indeed been kept), touching the head of her father, goat-rider Zeus, that she would be a virgin for all time, the noble goddess. And her father Zeus granted her a fine privilege instead of marriage, and she took fat and seated herself down in mid house; in all shrines of the gods she enjoys honor, and with all mortals she is senior goddess.

Hestia too is seldom personified as a goddess and a further example of the Homeric hymns' particular focus on divine action. She does not appear in Homer at all, although she is mentioned as an anthropomorphic goddess briefly in Hesiod (*Th.* 452–3). The poet of the *Hymn to Aphrodite* very possibly invented this extended story of Apollo and Poseidon's unsuccessful pursuit of Hestia, who rounds out a trio of virgin goddesses whom Aphrodite cannot conquer in love.²³

As indicated above, as in the case of the *Hymn to Demeter*, the narrative of the *Hymn to Apollo* is concerned with the foundation of cult.²⁴ The first part of the hymn (1–181) recounts the birth of Apollo on Delos and the foundation of his shrine on the island, while the second longer section (182–546) turns attention to his slaying of Pytho and the foundation of Delphi. It has long been suspected that these were originally two separate hymns,²⁵ possibly a combination of an older Pythian hymn and a younger Delian hymn composed by Cynaethus on the occasion of a combined Delian and Pythian festival on Delos, celebrated by the Samian tyrant Polycrates in 523 BCE.²⁶ At the end of both sections, attention is given to Apollo's worship by humans. In the first, there is a description of Apollo's delight in his festival on Delos (146–64): Ionians gather to take part in competitions of boxing, dancing, and singing, while the Delian maidens hymn Apollo, Artemis, and Leto, and sing songs concerned with men and women of earlier generations. At the end of the Pythian section, a lengthy passage narrates Apollo's choice and establishment of Cretan sailors as the priests of his newly founded shrine in Delphi (388–544). The careful instructions he gives to the sailors, which include the erection of an altar, the sacrifice of white barley groats, and the singing of *Ie Paieon* (475–501), lack the foreboding of Demeter's instructions to the Eleusinians in the *Hymn to Demeter* to build a temple and propitiate her (256–74), as there befits the goddess's anger and her connections to the underworld. In the *Hymn to Apollo*, the sailors are terrified at the appearance of Apollo in the form of a dolphin, a natural reaction of mortals to an epiphany,²⁷ but the tone is hopeful. In speaking to the sailors, Apollo encourages them (462) and emphasizes their secure future as the stewards of his rich oracular temple. This Apollo of cult, who delights in his worship in Delos and instructs mortals in his rites at Delphi, is not essentially different from the Apollo we meet at the outset of the *Iliad*. While, in *Iliad* 1.44–52, Apollo brings pestilence upon the Achaeans with his arrows,

23 See further Faulkner 2008: 101–3. *h.Hom.* 29 is dedicated to Hestia.

24 The fragmentary first *Hymn to Dionysus* appears to have narrated the liberation of Hera from the bonds of Hephaestus by Dionysus and his acceptance into Olympus, which has been connected to the Samian Tonaia festival. The hymn was directly concerned with the establishment of Dionysus cult. See West 2001: 3–4 and fr. D 1–3 for the establishment of Dionysiac trieteric festivals.

25 For a recent review of the extensive scholarship on this topic, see Chappell 2011, in support of the separatist position. Miller 1986 and Strauss Clay 1989 have been particularly influential in arguing for a unitarian view. Richardson 2010: 9–13 has alternatively suggested that the poem can be divided into three main movements.

26 West 2003a: 9–12.

27 On the characteristic responses to epiphany, see Richardson 1974: 208.

viewed from a different perspective this is an act of support for his faithful priest Chryses, who implores him to help (*Il.* 1.37–42):

‘κλῦθί μοι, ἀργυρότοξ’, ὃς Χρῦσην ἀμφιβέβηκας
 Κίλλαν τε ζαθέην, Τενέδοιό τε Ἴφι ἀνάσσεις,
 Σμινθεῦ· εἴ ποτέ τοι χαρίεντ’ εἰ νηὸν ἔρεψα,
 ἢ’ εἰ δὴ ποτέ τοι κατὰ πίονα μηρί’ ἔκηα
 ταύρων ἢ δ’ αἰγῶν, τόδε μοι κρήνηον ἐέλωρ·
 τείσειαν Δαναοὶ ἐμὰ δάκρυα σοῖσι βέλεσσιν.’

‘Hear me, lord of the silver bow, protector of Chryse and holy Cilla, and mighty lord of Tenedus, Smintheus. If ever I have built a shrine that is pleasing to you, if ever I have burnt for you fat-wrapped thigh-bones of bulls and goats, grant this my prayer: may the Danaans pay for my tears with your arrows.’²⁸

In both sections of the hymn, Apollo is undoubtedly a formidable god. The hymnic narrative nonetheless seems to dwell upon a different side of the god, who haughtily but helpfully establishes his cultic interactions with mortals outside the context of war, bringing joy to mortals as well as instilling fear, behavior suiting a powerful god.²⁹

HERMES AND APHRODITE

In contrast to the hymns to Demeter and Apollo, the narratives of the hymns to Hermes and Aphrodite bear a lighter tone. In Homer, Hermes is chiefly a messenger god, serious in aspect and unconnected to humor. There are, however, hints of his more light-hearted side. In *Odyssey* 8, the bard Demodocus tells the tale of Aphrodite and Ares caught in adultery by Hephaestus, who holds them in bed with a trap of chains. Here Hermes incites the laughter of the other gods who look upon the trapped pair: Apollo asks him whether he would accept such chains in order to sleep with Aphrodite and Hermes replies that he would suffer three times the number of chains in order to do so (*Od.* 8.334–43). The *Hymn to Hermes* celebrates Hermes as a trickster god and is appropriately full of humor and wit.³⁰ Immediately after his birth, Hermes sets about to steal Apollo’s cattle. When Apollo arrives at his dwelling suspecting that he is the thief, Hermes prevaricates and (*h. Merc.* 295–6),

οἰωνὸν προέηκεν ἀειρόμενος μετὰ χερσίν,
 τλήμονα γαστρὸς ἔριθρον, ἀτάσθαλον ἀγγελιώτην

as he was borne aloft in Apollo’s arms, he emitted an omen, a menial servant of the belly, an unruly messenger.

28 Trans. Hammond 1987.

29 See Chappell 2011: 75–7, who rightly downplays earlier views of different conceptions of Apollo in the two sections, as alternately dangerous or ambivalent in the Delos section and moral or benevolent in the Pythian section.

30 On Hermes and humor, see Vergados 2011: 87–98 and 2013: 26–39.

The humor here is multi-faceted, as the low comedy of bodily functions – Hermes' fart – is contrasted with elevated language. The word τλήμων is elsewhere associated with higher concepts of the spirit (θυμός or ψυχή).³¹

After this episode of the ominous fart, Hermes and Apollo bring their case before Zeus for arbitration (313–580). Throughout the scene, Hermes remains mendacious and devious, as he tries to get what he wants from his brother and father. There are nonetheless more serious moments. Hermes' cosmogonic and theogonic song performed to Apollo (414–35), which resembles Hesiod's *Theogony* in its general structure, concludes with his own praise and thus establishes his legitimacy amongst the Olympians.³² Hermes must also at the end of the poem swear a solemn oath that he will not again steal from Apollo (521–3). In other words, the humorous and tricky behavior of Hermes plays a part in a serious affair, the reordering of divine prerogatives (τιμαί) in the Olympian hierarchy, as Strauss Clay has argued convincingly.³³ Ultimately, the very humor of the hymn is part of the celebration of Hermes' nature as a god.

Although there is significantly less attention given to cult in the *Hymn to Hermes* than in the hymns to Demeter and Apollo, this element is not absent. When Hermes steals the cattle of Apollo, he kills two of the cattle in an elaborate ritual (105–41), laying out the meat of the beasts in twelve portions (*h. Merc.* 124–9):

ῥινούς δ' ἐξετάνυσσε καταστυφέλω ἐνὶ πέτρῃ,
ὡς ἔτι νῦν τὰ μέτασσα πολυχρόνιοι πεφύασιν
δηρὸν δὴ μετὰ ταῦτα καὶ ἄκριτοι. αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα
Ἑρμῆς χαρμόφρων εὐρύσσατο πίονα ἔργα
λείω ἐπὶ πλαταμῶνι, καὶ ἔσχισε δώδεκα μοίρας
κληροπαλεῖς· τέλεον δὲ γέρας προσέθηκεν ἐκάστη.

The hides he spread out on a rugged rock, as even now in after-time they remain long-lasting through the ages in a fused mass. Then Hermes happily drew off the rich cooking from the spits onto a smooth slab, and split it into twelve portions determined by lot, and assigned a fixed rank to each one.

The division of the meat into twelve equal portions next to the river Alpheus suggests that this episode provides an *aition* for the foundation of the cult of the Twelve Gods at Olympia.³⁴ Later in the hymn, Hermes' reception of the bee oracle from Apollo (550–66) may explain the origins of the cult of the bee maidens at Delphi.³⁵ Even if these passages are taken to refer to particular cults, which is not

31 See Katz 1999, Vergados 2011: 97 and 2013: 441.

32 See Strauss Clay 1989: 139–40, Vergados 2013: 498–500.

33 Strauss Clay 1989: 95–151.

34 See a full discussion of the issue at Vergados 2013: 324–9, with further bibliography. Admittedly, many of Hermes' actions in the scene are not typical of sacrifice. Strauss Clay 1989: 119–22 alternatively suggests that the scene is a feast.

35 Larson 1995, although for arguments against this interpretation see Vergados 2013: 568–9. Nobili 2011 suggests that the hymn can be connected to the Panathenaea. M. Cuypers also points out to me that the invention of the lyre, although different from the establishment of cult practice, is linked to cult through the generic relationship of the lyre and the celebration of the gods.

altogether certain, they are circumscribed episodes and less integral to the narrative than the theme of cultic foundation in the hymns to Demeter and Apollo. There is accordingly very little interaction in the *Hymn to Hermes* between gods and mortals. Both Hermes (90–3) and Apollo (190–211) exchange a few words with the Old Man of Onchestus, the only mortal character in the poem, to whom neither god makes an epiphany.³⁶

The *Hymn to Aphrodite*, which recounts Aphrodite's seduction of the shepherd Anchises, is centered around interaction between mortal and goddess, but like the *Hymn to Hermes* contains very limited mention of cult worship.³⁷ The narrative of the *Hymn to Aphrodite* is also often ironic or light-hearted. Zeus takes his revenge upon Aphrodite for making him sleep with mortals by making her fall precipitously in love with Anchises (45–57). The seduction scene that follows has Aphrodite dress up in a mortal disguise as a Phrygian princess, tricking the Trojan Anchises into going to bed with her through an elaborate lie, all the while apparently unaware that she herself is being manipulated by Zeus.³⁸ After the union is consummated and Aphrodite makes a full epiphany to Anchises (168–83), the tone of the poem becomes more serious.³⁹ The goddess calms Anchises' fear and tells him of the child Aeneas who will be born of their union (192–201), recounts the divine affairs of Ganymede and Tithonus (202–38), explains her own shame and embarrassment at the union (239–55), and gives instructions about the rearing of Aeneas (256–90). But there remains an ironic undertone even in the shame of Aphrodite. When at the end of the poem Aphrodite threatens Anchises with the destructive force of Zeus' thunderbolt should he reveal anything about their union, the idea that the instigator of the union should also be the guardian of its secrecy can hardly but provoke a wry smile (286–8). Such a narrative of deceit and shame, colored by humor and irony, is entirely in keeping with the Homeric presentation of the goddess. In the *Iliad*, Aphrodite flees the battlefield after being wounded by Diomedes and runs, humorously, crying to her mother Dione, who tells her that she is unsuited to the deeds of war (πολεμήϊα ἔργα, *Il.* 5.428). The deeds to which she is suited are those celebrated in the hymn (Μοῦσά μοι ἔννεπε ἔργα πολυχρύσου Ἀφροδίτης, 1): love, deceit, and even the shame brought about by love affairs. In the Odyssean song of Demodocus mentioned above in connection with Hermes, Aphrodite's deceitful affair with Ares ends in her being shamed before all of the gods, who stand around and mock while she and her lover are trapped on the bed in chains (*Od.* 8.321–58). There are clear connections between the epic material of that episode and the hymn: the formulaic preparation scene of *h. Ven.* 58–63 is almost identical to *Od.* 8.362–5, while in the more serious context of the

36 Hermes and Apollo do not reveal to the Old Man that they are gods. See Vergados 2013: 301, who explains the fact that neither god reveals his divinity by the 'extremely anthropomorphic and humorous presentation of the gods in the poem.'

37 See Faulkner 2013 on the lack of cult focus in the hymn and possible implications of this for the hymn's performance context.

38 For Aphrodite's probable ignorance of Zeus' instigation of the affair, see De Jong 1989: 21.

39 See Faulkner 2008: 235–6. Richardson 2010: 28 speaks of the 'bitter-sweet irony' of the entire hymn.

story of Tithonus' disastrous affair with Dawn, the language used of Tithonus' limbs incapacitated by old age (*h. Ven.* 234) is very similar to that used of Aphrodite and Ares trapped under Hephaestus' chains (*Od.* 8.298). The hymn's description of Aphrodite's preparations prior to seducing Anchises also makes use of language found in the humorous episode of Hera's seduction of Zeus in *Iliad* 14, in which task Hera is aided by Aphrodite.⁴⁰ In contrast to the epics, the hymnic narrative focuses upon the relationship of Aphrodite and Zeus, a privileged figure in all of the long narratives of the Homeric hymns. It has been argued that the poem narrates a permanent change in that relationship, in that the shamed Aphrodite will no longer be able to bring about unions between men and gods.⁴¹ Nevertheless, an audience familiar with Homer should not be surprised to find Aphrodite in a compromising situation. In the end, she is not so dissimilar to her Homeric counterpart. The difference, as so often in the Homeric hymns, is largely one of perspective and context.

As we have seen above, the gods in the Homeric hymns are consistently at the center of the narratives. In some instances divinities that have very little presence in the Homeric epics, such as Demeter, are celebrated at length, while in others prominent Homeric gods are seen from a different angle. Zeus, the prominent leader of the gods in the Homeric epics, is also an essential and all-powerful agent in the Homeric hymns. But he stays more in the background, while the other gods under his rule take center stage. It should also be remembered that the gods are ultimately privileged participants in all of the Homeric hymns, long and short, as a target audience of the poet's address. The gods are often the direct addressees at the outset of the poem, while the closing formulae of salutation and prayer (*χαίρειν*) establishes a direct relationship between mortal and divinity. As Calame has argued, the Homeric hymns are not just songs about the gods, but themselves poetic offerings for the gods.⁴²

40 On these similarities see further Faulkner 2008: 32–3.

41 Strauss Clay 1989: 152–201. For a different perspective, see Faulkner 2008: 3–18.

42 Calame 2011.