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A God by Any Other Name? The Importance of Epithets in the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*

The chief concern of the Homeric hymns, it has been asserted, is to explain the acquisition of *timai* by the Olympians (J.S. Clay, *The Politics of Olympus* 1989: 96). My claim is that much of this work is accomplished through the epithets, particularly in the *Hymn to Hermes*. The *timai* of Hermes are clearly reflected in the hymn by both the actions of the young god and the context-specific epithets chosen by the poet to describe him. The poet's strategic placement of epithets provides an overview for the dynamic of the narrative. Additionally, the epithets reveal shifts in focalization in the poem as Hermes' status is accepted or questioned by his divine relations. Unlike the epithets in Homeric epic, which have been seen as purely "ornamental" (M. Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse* 1971: 118) or imbued with "traditional referentiality" (J.M. Foley, *Immanent Art* 1991: 7), the epithets in the *Hymn to Hermes* frequently hold contextual significance.

In the proem to the hymn and the poet's description of the child's birth, the epithets used for Hermes are proleptic: they predict certain attributes that Hermes will obtain in the hymn or during his tenure as an Olympian. These epithets set up a metaphorical "bank account" from which the child can draw as he wins his *timai* in succeeding episodes. After the proem, the context-specific epithets used to describe Hermes are infrequent in the early sections of the hymn. As the young god accomplishes his *erga*, the number of epithets increases and their nature shifts from generic to specific or earned. These earned epithets may be genealogical or refer to his accomplishments.

To join the Olympians, the illegitimate son of Maia must achieve recognition from his father and brother. When the child acts divine, Hermes is labeled with his patronymic; he is merely the son of Maia when he performs subversive acts. By the end of the hymn, both Zeus and Apollo use familial epithets in speeches to Hermes, accepting their legitimate relationship to the young divinity. In his confrontations with the gods and his reconciliation with Apollo, Hermes earns epithets that relate to the acts he performs. For example, in accusing Hermes of the theft of his cattle, Apollo bestows on Hermes the title *archos phêlêteôn* (292). Similarly, Zeus calls Hermes *diaktoros* (392) when ordering him to lead Apollo to his cattle. Hermes' final appellations refer back to the proleptic epithets offered in the proem.

Context-specific epithets are used in the other major Homeric hymns, but to a lesser degree. In the *Hymn to Apollo*, the god acquires his epithets *argurotoxos* and *hekatêbolos* only after claiming the bow; he becomes *pythios* after slaying the dragon and *delphinios* after appearing to the Cretan sailors as a dolphin. In the hymns to Aphrodite and Demeter, genealogical epithets play an important role in redefining the status of the goddesses. In each case, the epithets are important to the narrative sequence of the hymns and fulfill a function distinct from epithets in Homeric epic. Through the use of naming in the Homeric hymns, especially in the *Hymn to Hermes*, the poet is able to create, define, predict and confirm the roles of the divinities. The fundamental illegitimacy of

Hermes at the outset of the hymn compels the poet to reinforce the god's *timai* with an explanation of his deserved epithets.