The Homeric Hymns are a group of poems, each to a specific god (Demeter, Dionysus, Apollo, etc.), written in the style of the Iliad and the Odyssey. The Hymn to Hermes was probably written down around 520 B.C., though the material it contains is of great antiquity. Translated by Lewis Hyde in Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art (New York: North Point Press, 1999), pp. 317-31.

HERMES IS BORN

Muse, sing in honor of Hermes, the son of Zeus and Maia, lord of Kyllene, lord of Arcadia with all its sheep, bringer of luck, messenger of the gods. His mother was Maia with the wonderful hair, a shy and shamefaced nymph who stayed in her shady cave, avoiding the company of the blessed gods. In the darkest night, when sweet sleep held white-armed Hera fast, Zeus, the son of Kronos, used to lie with the nymph with the fabulous hair. No one knew about it, neither the gods, who do not die, nor human beings, who do.

Now, when he had finished what he had in mind and when ten moons had risen in the sky, Zeus led his notorious child into the light. Maia gave birth to a wily[1] boy, flattering and cunning, a robber and cattle thief, a bringer of dreams, awake all night, waiting by the gates of the city—Hermes, who was soon to earn himself quite a reputation among the gods, who do not die.

As the sun rose on the fourth day of the month, lady Maia bore him; by noon he played the lyre and by evening he had stolen the cattle of Apollo, who shoots from afar.

HERMES INVENTS THE LYRE

Indeed, he didn't lie around in his sacred cradle, no, the minute he slipped from his mother's immortal arms he leapt up and set out to find Apollo's herds. As he crossed the threshold of that roomy cave, he happened on a turtle and got himself an endless source of wealth. For you should know that it was Hermes who first made the turtle into something that could sing. Their paths crossed at the courtyard gate, where the turtle was waddling by, chewing the thick grass in front of the dwelling. Hermes, the bringer of luck, took a close look, laughed, and said:

"Here's a bit of luck[2] I can't ignore! Hello there, you shapely thing, dancing girl, life of the party. Lovely to see you. How'd a mountain girl with a shiny shell get so playful? Let me carry you inside! What a blessing! Do me a favor, come on, I'll respect you. It's safer inside, you could get in trouble out there. A living turtle, they say, keeps troublesome witchcraft away. And yet, if you were to die you'd sing most beautifully."

So saying, Hermes picked up the turtle with both hands and carried his lovely toy into the house. He turned her over and with a scoop of gray iron scraped the marrow from her mountain shell. And, just as a swift thought can fly through the heart of a person haunted with care, just as bright glances spin from the
eyes, so, in one instant, Hermes knew what to do and did it. He cut stalks of reed to measure, fitted them through the shell, and fastened their ends across the back. Skillfully, he tightened a piece of cowhide, set the arms in place, fixed a yoke across them, and stretched seven sheep-gut strings to sound in harmony.

When he was finished, he took that lovely thing and tested each string in turn with a flat pick. It rang out wonderfully at the touch of his hand, and he sang along beautifully, improvising a few random snatches the way teenagers sing out insults at a fair. He sang the song of Zeus, the son of Kronos, and Maia with the wonderful shoes, how they used to chat in comradely love; he broadcast the story of his own famous conception. And he sang in praise of Maia’s servant girls and stately rooms, of all the tripods and caldrons she had to her name.

HERMES STEALS APOLLO’S CATTLE

As he sang, however, his mind wandered to other matters. For Hermes longed to eat meat. So, taking the hollow lyre and tucking it in his sacred cradle, he sped from the sweet-smelling halls to a lookout point, a tricky scheme brewing in his heart, the kind that mischievous folk cook up in the middle of the night.

The chariot and horses of Helios were going down below the earth toward Ocean when Hermes came running to the shadowed mountains of Pieria. There the divine cattle of the blessed gods have their stable and graze in lovely, unmown meadows.

There and then, Maia’s son, the keen-eyed slayer of Argus,[3] cut fifty loudly lowing cattle from the herd and drove them zigzag across the sandy place. He thought to drive them backward, too, another crafty trick, mixing up their footprints—the front behind and the hind before—while he himself walked straight ahead.

And right away on that sandy beach he wove himself fabulous sandals, such as no one ever thought or heard of. Tying together the newly sprouted myrtle twigs and tamarisk, he bound them, leaves and all, securely to his feet, a pair of shoes for those who travel light. (The glorious slayer of Argus had picked those shrubs in Pieria when getting ready for this trip, inventing on the spot as one will do when packing in a hurry.)

But as he was hurrying through the grassy fields of Onchestus, he was seen by an old man setting up his flowering vineyard.[4] The notorious son of Maia spoke first:

“Hey, old man stooping over the hoe, you’re sure to have barrels of wine when all those vines bear fruit. If, that is, you listen to me and bear in mind that you haven’t seen what you’ve seen, and you haven’t heard what you’ve heard, and, in general, keep your mouth shut as long as nobody’s bothering you personally.”

Having said all this, Hermes gathered the excellent herd of cattle and drove them through many shadowy mountains and echoing gorges and fields in flower.

And now divine night, his dark helper, was almost over and the dawn, which forces mortals to work, was quickly coming on. Bright Selene—daughter of Pallas, lord Megamedes’ son—had just climbed to her watch-post when the sturdy child of Zeus drove Apollo’s wide-browed cattle to the river Alpheus. They arrived unwearied at a high-roofed barn and watering troughs standing before a remarkable meadow.

A SACRIFICE TO THE GODS
Then, having foddered the bellowing herd and packed them into the stable, chewing fresh lotus and sweet ginger, he gathered a pile of wood and set himself to seek the art of fire, for Hermes, you should know, is responsible for fire-sticks and fire.\[5\]

He took a stout laurel branch, trimmed it with a knife, and spun it on a block of wood held firmly in his hand until the hot smoke crept up. Then he piled thick bunches of dry sticks in a sunken trench. The flames caught and spread fiercely.

While the power of glorious Hephaestus kindled the fire, Hermes, full of his own power, dragged two lowing longhorns out of the stable and up to the flames. He threw them panting on their backs, rolled them over, bent their heads aside, and pierced their spinal cords.

Then Hermes set about his chores in turn. First he cut up the richly marbled flesh and skewered it on wooden spits; he roasted all of it—the muscle and the prized sirloin and the dark-blooded belly—and laid the spits out on the ground.

The skins he stretched over a rippling rock (still today, ages later, those hides are there, and they will be there for ages to come). Next he gladly drew the dripping chunks of meat from the spits, spread them on a stone, and divided them into twelve portions distributed by lot, making each one exactly right.\[6\]

And glorious Hermes longed to eat that sacrificial meat. The sweet smell weakened him, god though he was; and yet, much as his mouth watered, his proud heart\[7\] would not let him eat. Later he took the fat and all the flesh and stored them in that ample barn, setting them high up as a token\[8\] of his youthful theft. That done, he gathered dry sticks and let the fire devour, absolutely, the hooves of the cattle, and their heads.

And when the god had finished, he threw his sandals into the deep pooling Alpheus. He quenched the embers and spread sand over the black ashes. And so the night went by under the bright light of the moon.

HERMES COMES HOME AT DAWN

As soon as the sun rose, the god set out for home, the bright peaks of Kyllene. No blessed god, no mortal man saw him on that long journey, and no dogs barked as he sped by.\[9\]

And at his mother's home, Hermes, bringer of luck, son of Zeus, slipped sideways through the keyhole like fog on an autumn breeze. Making none of the noise you might expect, he walked straight to the sumptuous heart of the cave. Then glorious Hermes leapt to his cradle, wrapped his baby clothes around his shoulders as if he were a feeble infant, and lay there, picking at the blanket around his knees and clutching his lovely lyre safe at his left hand.

But the god didn't get past the goddess, his mother. "Hello there, you double sneak!" she said to him. "Where exactly have you been at this hour, you who wrap yourself in shamelessness?\[10\] I believe I'd rather see Apollo carry you out of here, bound hand and foot in unbreakable ropes, than have you grow up to pester the woods with your sneaking thievery. But go ahead! Who am I? Your father meant you to be a great bother, both to the gods, who do not die, and to human beings, who do."

Hermes answered her, his eye on the bottom line:\[11\] "Mother, why are you trying to frighten me, a feeble babe who's never heard such big words, a timid child shaking at his mother's wrath?"

"But seriously, I'm ready to do whatever I must so that you and I will never go hungry. You're wrong to insist we live in a place like this. Why should we be the only gods who never eat the fruits of sacrifice and
prayer? Better always to live in the company of other deathless ones—rich, glamorous, enjoying heaps of grain—than forever to sit by ourselves in a gloomy cavern.

"And as for honor, my plan is to have a share of Apollo's power. If my father won't give it to me, I intend to be—and I mean it—the Prince of Thieves. If Leto's glorious boy comes after me, he'll soon be in more trouble than he is now. I'll go to Pytho, break into his big house and steal all his wonderful tripods, his caldrons and his gold, all his gleaming iron and his fancy clothes. See if I don't!"

And so they argued back and forth, the son of Zeus, who holds the shield, and lady Maia.

APOLLO SEARCHES FOR THE THIEF

Now Morning, the daughter of Dawn, was rising from deep Ocean's currents, bringing light to men, when Apollo passed through Onchestus, the lovely grove, sacred to the god who makes the earth quake. There he found an old man grazing his beast along the path by the garden fence. Leto's glorious son spoke first, saying:

"Old man, you who've spent your life weeding thistles from grassy Onchestus, I have come here from Pieria looking for cattle from my herd—cows, all of them, with curving horns. The slate-black bull was by himself, grazing away from the others. Four of my sharp-eyed hounds, as smart as men, chased after the cows, but all were left behind—the bull and the dogs—which is quite uncanny. The cows left the soft, sweet pasture just as the sun was setting. Now tell me, old man born so long ago, have you seen anyone go by driving these cows?"

Then the old man answered him, saying, "Well, sonny, your eyes see so many things it's hard to know where to begin. So many people go down this road, some good, some bad. No telling who's who.

"However, I was up in my little vineyard working my hoe yesterday from dawn to dusk, and as the sun was going down I had the impression, dear sir, though it's hard to say for sure, that I saw a child—I couldn't really identify him—following a herd of longhorned cows, a baby with a staff who zigzagged side to side, and made the cows walk backward, their heads toward him."

As soon as he heard what the old man said, Apollo hurried on his way. Before long, he noticed a wide-winged bird and knew immediately that the thief was a child of Zeus, the son of Kronos. So the lord Apollo, himself a son of Zeus, covering his broad shoulders with a dark cloud, hurried on to holy Pylos looking for his footloose cattle.

And when the Great Archer made out their footprints, he cried out: "Well, well! This is remarkable, what I'm seeing. Clearly these are longhorn-cattle tracks, but they all point backward, toward the fields of daffodils! And these others, they are not the tracks of a man or a woman, nor of a gray wolf or a bear or lion. And I don't think the shaggy-maned centaur leaves such prints. What swift feet took these long strides? The tracks on this side of the path are weird, but those on the other side are weirder still!"

THE CONFRONTATION

So saying, lord Apollo, the son of Zeus, hurried on until he came to the forested mountain of Kyllene and the deeply shaded cave in the rocks where the divine nymph gave birth to Zeus' child. A sweet smell lay over the lovely slopes, and many spindle-legged sheep grazed in the grass. Over the stone threshold and into the dark cavern stepped bright Apollo himself.

Now, when the son of Zeus and Maia saw the archer Apollo in such a rage about his cattle, he wiggled down into the sweet-smelling blankets. Just as dark ashes hide the embers of burnt tree stumps, so Hermes slid snuggling under the covers when he saw the Great Archer. He bunched his head and hands
and feet together like a newborn child overcome by sweet sleep, though in fact he was wide awake, his lyre tucked under his armpit.

The son of Leto saw all this. Immediately he spied the beautiful mountain nymph and her dear son, a tiny child wrapped in crafty subterfuge. He looked into every corner of their great home; with a shiny key he opened three inner sanctuaries full of nectar and sweet ambrosia. The closets were filled with gold and the nymph's silvery clothes, as is the fashion in homes of the blessed gods. Then, having searched every corner of the dwelling, Leto's son addressed himself to glorious Hermes:

"Little boy lying in the cradle, you had better tell me quickly what happened to my cattle, or you and I will soon be in an unseemly fight. I've a mind to take and throw you into the awful, hopeless dark of gloomy Tartarus. Neither your mother nor your father will be able to free you and bring you back to earth. You will walk out your days beneath the ground, a leader of dead babies."

Hermes answered him, with his eye on the bottom line: "Son of Leto, why are you yelling like a bully? You've come here looking for cows from your pasture? I haven't seen them. I haven't heard a word about them. No one's told me a thing. I can't give you any information, nor could I claim the reward for information.

"Do I look like a cattle driver? A big strong guy? That is not my kind of work. I am interested in other things: I care for sleep above all, and the milk of my mother's breasts, and a blanket over my shoulders, and warm baths.

"I'd advise you not to talk like this in public; the deathless gods would think it odd indeed, a day-old child bringing field animals into the courtyard. You're talking wildly. I was born yesterday; my feet are tender and the ground is rough beneath them.

"Still, if you insist, I am willing to swear a great oath by my father's head, and vow that I didn't steal your cows and that I haven't seen anyone else steal your cows—whatever 'cows' may be, for, to tell you the truth, I only know of them by hearsay."

Hermes' eyes twinkled as he spoke and he kept arching his brows, looking side to side and making long whistling noises as he listened to his own lying words.

Far-working Apollo laughed softly then, and said to Hermes: "My dear boy, what a tricky-hearted cheat you are! The way you talk, I'm quite convinced you broke into many fine homes last night, quietly swiping all the goods, leaving many a poor soul without a chair to sit on. You're going to be a great nuisance to lonely herdsmen in the mountain woods when you get to hankering after meat and come upon their cows or fleecy sheep. For the rest of time the gods, who do not die, will surely award you the title of Prince of Thieves. But come on, O friend of the black night, unless you want your latest nap turned into endless sleep, get out of that cradle."

So saying, Phoebus Apollo picked the child up and began to carry him. At this point, the powerful killer of Argus had a plan. Held aloft in Apollo's hands, he cut loose an omen, an exhausted belly slave, a rude herald of worse to come. At the same time he sneezed and Apollo, hearing all this, dropped him on the ground. Eager now to be on his way, still he sat beside Hermes, mocking:

"Never fear, little baby, son of Zeus and Maia. I'm sure these omens of yours will eventually lead me to my cattle. Why don't you lead the way?"

Hermes of Kyllene leapt up, his blanket around his shoulders and his hands covering his ears. "Where are you taking me, Far-Worker, most impatient of the gods?" he said. "Are you so angrily provoking me all because of your cattle? Oh dear! I wish all the cattle in the world would drop dead! I didn't steal your
cows, and I didn't see anybody else steal them either, whatever cows may be, for I've only heard reports. No, do the right thing. Take this to Zeus, the son of Kronos."

And so, with their hearts at odds, Hermes the shepherd and Leto's glorious son argued the quarrel, point by point. Apollo, sticking to the facts, tried to snare glorious Hermes (who really was a cattle thief), while Hermes of Kyllene tried to lead the god of the silver bow astray with rhetoric and wheedling arguments.

THE ARGUMENT BEFORE ZEUS

But when he found Apollo able to match his every ruse, Hermes began to walk quickly across the sand, leading the son of Zeus and Leto. Soon these fine children of Zeus came to the peaks of fragrant Olympus, to their father, the son of Kronos. There, for both of them, the scales of justice were set. And there on snowy Olympus, after Dawn had settled on her golden throne, the gods, who do not die, had gathered to talk.

Then Hermes and Apollo of the Silver Bow stood before Zeus' knees and Zeus, who thunders in the heavens, spoke to his glorious son, asking, "Sunshine, where have you been to capture this fabulous prize, a newborn babe with a herald's face? This is some serious business you bring before the council of the gods!"

The far-working lord replied, "Father, you can tease about my love of spoils, but this is not a silly story I have to tell. Here is a child, an accomplished thief, whom I found after a long search through the hills of Kyllene. As far as I'm concerned, for catching folks on earth off-guard, I've never seen anyone, god or mortal, as brash as he.

"He stole my cows from their meadow and drove them off in the evening along the shore of the loud-roaring sea, headed straight for Pylos. The tracks were double, quite remarkable, the puzzling work of a clever spirit. Preserved in the dark dust, the cow's prints led back to the fields of daffodils, while this weird creature crossed the sandy ground, not on his feet and not on his hands, but as if—he was walking on little oak trees. When he drove the cattle across sandy ground, the tracks stood out quite clearly, but when he left the wide stretch of sand and hit hard ground, all tracks disappeared, both his and the cattle's. Still, a mortal man saw him driving the wide-browed beasts straight to Pylos.

"Quietly he hid them away, then sneaked home by some devious route to lie—as still as the blackest night—in a cradle in the dark of a darkened cave. Not even a sharp-eyed eagle could have seen him there. Constantly rubbing his eyes with his fists, he fabricated falsehoods, and spoke up boldly, saying, 'I haven't seen them; I haven't heard of them; no one has told me about them. I can't tell you about them, nor can I win the reward for telling.'"

When bright Apollo finished speaking and sat down, Hermes turned to Zeus—son of Kronos, lord of all the gods—and answered, saying: "Zeus my father, of course I will tell you the truth, for I am an honest boy. I cannot tell a lie. Apollo came to our house today at dawn, looking for his ambling cattle. He brought no witness with him; not one of the blessed gods had seen this theft. Instead, he tried to torture a confession from me. He kept threatening to throw me deep into Tartarus. He is in the powerful bloom of youth, while I—as he is well aware—was just born yesterday.

"I'm no cattle thief, no big strong guy. You tell people you are my dear father, so please believe me. I've not had the pleasure of driving cattle to my home. I haven't even left the house. I'm telling the truth. I greatly revere Hellos and the other divinities; you I love; Apollo fills me with awe. You yourself know I'm not guilty. I will even swear this great oath: Verily, by the gods' richly decorated colonnades, I am innocent!
“Someday I'll get back at this bully, strong as he is, for his pitiless inquisition. But for now, please help your youngest son.”

As he spoke, Hermes of Kyllene, the slayer of Argus, winked and clutched his baby blanket tightly in his arms. Zeus laughed aloud at the sight of his scheming child so smoothly denying his guilt about the cattle. And he ordered them both to come to an agreement and go find the cattle. He told Hermes the guide to lead the way and, dismissing the mischief in his heart, to show Apollo where the cattle were hidden. Then the son of Kronos nodded his head and good Hermes obeyed, for the will of Zeus, who holds the shield, persuades without effort.

HERMES AND APOLLO EXCHANGE GIFTS

Then Zeus' two fine sons hurried to sandy Pylos; at the ford of Alpheus they came to the fields and the roomy barn that sheltered the cattle at night. And as Hermes drove the sturdy cows out of their stony enclosure and into the light, Leto's son, glancing aside, noticed the cowhides spread on the rocks. Right away he questioned glorious Hermes:

"And how were you able to flay two cows, you crafty rogue, you little newborn baby? Looking back on it, your powers amaze me! You don't need to spend much time growing up, Kyllenian boy, son of Maia!"

As he spoke, Apollo twisted together strong willow bands, intending to tie Hermes up. But the bands could not hold the boy; they fell away at a distance and from the ground where they landed at once began to sprout, intertwining as they rose and quickly covering the roving cattle, as Hermes the thief intended. Apollo, watching, was astounded.

Fire flashing in his eyes, the strong killer of Argus looked furtively around, hoping to elude Leto's glorious son. Subtly, then, he began to soften that stern, far-shooting archer.

Cradling the lyre in his left arm, he struck each string in turn with the pick, and the instrument rang out awesomely. Bright Apollo laughed for joy as the sweet throb of that marvelous instrument stole into his heart, and a gentle longing seized his listening soul.

Playing sweetly upon the lyre, the son of Maia plucked up his courage and stood at the left hand of bright Apollo. And, letting the lyre introduce him, he raised his voice and sang, and his voice was lovely.

He sang the story of the gods, who do not die, and of the dark earth, and how each came to be at the beginning of time, and how each came to have what now is theirs. Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses, was the first among the gods he honored in his song, for the son of Maia was one of her followers. Then this good son of Zeus praised the other immortals, each in order of age; he told how each was born, naming them one by one in order as he struck his cradled lyre.

And Apollo was seized with a longing he could do nothing about; he opened his mouth and the words flew out: "Butcher of cattle, trickster, busy boy, friend of merry-makers, the things you're interested in are worth fifty cows. Soon I believe we shall settle our quarrel in peace. But come now, tell me, wily son of Maia: was this marvelous thing with you at birth, or did some god or mortal man give you that noble gift and teach you such heavenly song? For this is a new sound, a wonder to my ears; I swear, neither men nor Olympian gods have ever heard anything like it, except for you, O thieving son of Zeus and Maia.

"What skill you have! What a cure for hopeless care! What style! Honestly, three things seem mixed together in this music: humor and eros and sweet sleep. I am a follower of the Olympian Muses—those who love the dance and the bright sound of poetry, full-voiced song, and the lovely call of the pipes—and
yet nothing has ever struck my spirit like this, not even the flashiest songs of young men at festivals. In short, I'm amazed, son of Zeus, at how well you play the lyre.

"But now, since you have such remarkable talent, sit down, little boy, and show some respect for the wisdom of the old. Know that you shall now be famous among the immortal gods, you and your mother both. These words are true: by my dogwood staff I swear I shall make you the renowned guide of the deathless gods. Luck will follow you. I will never deceive you; I will give you wonderful gifts."

Then Hermes answered with his eye on the bottom line: "You have an inquiring mind, Far-Shooter. I do not mind your learning this art. Today you shall be its master! For I want to be your friend in both thought and word.

"You have inner knowledge of all things, for you sit at the front of the deathless gods, both good and strong. Wise Zeus loves you, as well he should, and has given you formidable gifts. They say you know from his own mouth the honors that will come to the gods; you know his oracles, O Archer, and you know his laws. From all this I'm already aware of your great fortune.

"And, clearly, you are free to learn whatever strikes your fancy. Since it seems you've set your heart on playing the lyre, go ahead—play it and sing, give yourself over to joy. Do me the honor, my friend, of taking it as a gift from me.

"You have a talent for apt and orderly speech; take my clear-voiced friend in your hands and sing. Carry it freely with you when you're off to a fabulous feast, a charming dance, a famous party. Day and night it brings joy. It's easy if you play it casually; it hates hard work and drudgery. If a wise man takes it up with skill, its sound will reveal all sorts of pleasure to his mind. If an ignorant man strikes it violently, however, it will chatter flighty foolishness in his ear.

"But you can choose to learn what you want to learn, noble son of Zeus, and so I give this lyre to you. As for me, I will see that the free-roving cattle feed in the high meadows and the grassy plains. The cows will mate easily with the bulls and litter the fields with heifers and bullocks.

"You always have your eye on the bottom line, Apollo; well, now you don't need to be so rough and angry."

Having said all this, Hermes held out the lyre; bright Apollo took it and willingly placed his shining whip in Hermes' hand, ordaining him Keeper of the Herds. The son of Maia gladly accepted the gift, while Leto's fine son, lordly far-working Apollo, cradled the lyre in his left arm and tested each string with the pick. It made a wonderful sound, and as it did the god sang sweetly.

Afterward, these charming sons of Zeus drove the cows back to their sacred meadow, and themselves hurried to snowy Olympus, amusing themselves with the lyre as they went. Wise Zeus was glad, and confirmed their friendship. Hermes then loved Leto's son with constant affection, even as he does today. The gift of the lyre was a token of this love for the Great Archer, who played it skillfully, resting it on his arm. As for Hermes, he was eager to know another art, and made himself the shepherd's pipes, whose music carries great distances.

Then Leto's son said to Hermes, "Son of Maia, cunning boy and guide, I'm still afraid you might steal both my curving bow and my lyre, for Zeus has given you the honor of initiating deeds of exchange trade among men all over the fruitful world. Please set my heart at ease; swear one of the gods' great oaths, either nodding your head or calling on the powerful waters of the river Styx."

Then Maia's son nodded his head and promised he would not steal anything the Great Archer owned, nor would he ever approach his well-built home. And Apollo, son of Leto, swore he would be Hermes'
friend and companion. Of all the immortals—be they gods or human children of Zeus—he vowed to love none better than he loved Hermes.

APOLLO GIVES HERMES HIS OFFICES

Apollo then swore a serious oath: "For mortals and immortals alike, I would have this instrument be the sure and heartfelt token of our bond.

"Moreover, I now bestow on you the marvelous wand with three gold branches. It brings good fortune and wealth, and will protect you from harm as you effect the good words and deeds that I have learned from the mind of Zeus.

"But, noble child of Zeus, as for the other thing you have asked about, the art of prophecy, neither you nor any of the deathless gods may learn it. Only the mind of Zeus knows the future. I've made a pledge, I've vowed and sworn a great oath, that only I of all the undying gods might know his intricate plans. And so, dear brother, bearer of the golden wand, don't ask me to reveal the things all-seeing Zeus intends.

"As for me, I will sorely puzzle the unenviable race of men, destroying some and helping others. If a man comes to me guided by the call and flight of ominous birds, he will profit from my words; I won't deceive him. But the man who believes in birds that chatter idly, who invokes my prophetic art against my will, who tries to know more than the deathless gods, his journey will be useless, I swear. Still, I'd be happy to receive his offerings.

"I'll tell you one more thing, however, son of glorious Maia, son of Zeus who holds the shield, luck-bringing helper of the gods. There are certain sacred sisters, three virgins lifted on swift wings; their heads have been dusted with white meal; they live beneath a cliff on Parnassus.[15] They teach their own kind of fortune telling. I practiced it as a boy traipsing after cattle; my father doesn't care. The sisters fly back and forth from their home, feeding on waxy honeycombs and making things happen. They like to tell the truth when they have eaten honey and the spirit is on them; but if they've been deprived of that divine sweetness, they buzz about and mumble lies.

"I give them to you, then. Question them well and please your heart. And if mortal men you should instruct, they may have good fortune and follow you.

"And, son of Maia, tend, as well, the ranging, twisted-homed cattle, the horses, and the hard-working mules. May glorious Hermes be the lord of fire-eyed lions and white-toothed boars, and dogs; may he be lord of all the flocks and all the sheep the wide earth feeds. And Hermes alone shall be appointed messenger to the underworld, where Hades gives the ultimate gift and takes none in return."

In this way, with the blessing of the son of Kronos, lordly Apollo showed friendship and good will toward the son of Maia. So it is that Hermes moves among the gods, who do not die, and human beings, who must. And though he serves a few, most of the time, when night has fallen, he deceives the race whose time runs out.

And so farewell, son of Zeus and Maia; I will think of you often as I go on to other songs.

[1] Or "cunning," "versatile," "much traveled," "polytropic": polútropon (literally, turning-many-ways). In all of Greek literature, three characters are polytropic: Hermes, Odysseus, and Alcibiades.

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

From other versions of the story we know this man's name is Battus.

Hermes does not invent fire; he invents a method of making fire, a trick, a techne.

The twelve portions are moirás or "lots," "allotments." Hermes makes one for each of the twelve Olympian gods (Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Demeter, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Aphrodite, Hermes, Athena, Hephaestus, and Hestia).

Thymos: "heart," "soul," "breath," "mind"—the Homeric Greeks located intelligence in the chest and the speaking voice, not in the silent brain.

Sêma or "sign."

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

Or "wearing the cloak of shamelessness": anaideien epieimene.

Or "with crafty words": kerdaléoi. A root of this word is kerdos, "gain," "profit." Hermes has his eye on the main chance.

Poseidon.

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

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

These are called the Bee Maidens. Apollo gives Hermes a minor prophetic art.