

“Dearest to be Man's Companion”: Hermes, Divine Aid, and Agency

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Abstract: This paper compares passages from Book 24 of the *Iliad*, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, and the *Odyssey* and argues that *Hermes*' portrayal in archaic Greek literature is characterized by a high degree of sympathy for those under his guidance and a hands-on approach to divine intervention. In particular, parallels are drawn between *Hermes*' escorting of Priam to and from Achilles' camp, and his guidance of both *Persephone* and *Herakles* out of the underworld. These examples are contrasted with *Hermes*' role as a psychopomp and are used to argue that these texts display an understanding of divine aid that is not limited to mere function but which takes into account the personality and autonomous agency of individual deities.

The *Homeric Hymn to Athena* describe the goddess as one who simultaneously “loves the deeds of war, the sack of cities” and “saves the people as they go to war and come back.”¹ Similarly, *Hermes* is portrayed in archaic Greek literature both as a psychopomp and as a god who helps those seeking to *escape* the Underworld or comparably difficult situations. *Hermes* serves as Priam's charioteer during his journey to and from Achilles' camp in Book 24 of the *Iliad*, just as he does for *Persephone* when he escorts her out of Erebus in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. His actions and words in the *Iliad* show that he recognizes limitations on the help that gods are able to provide mortals, but that he is both inclined to and willing to bend the rules as far as possible in order to aid those under his protection. *Hermes*' aid is characterized by both a hands-on approach and by layers of subtlety. *Hermes*' assistance to Priam in the *Iliad*, to *Persephone* in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, and to *Herakles* in the *Odyssey* also demonstrate eschatological overtones: both *Herakles* and *Persephone* are able to make the journey out of Hades' realm, even though *Hermes*' job is usually to bring people into it.² These examples show that though the Greek gods have functions they fulfill, they are not defined by them and will even act in seeming opposition to their functions when they so choose.

In the *Iliad*, when Zeus instructs *Hermes* to escort Priam on his journey to retrieve Hector's body, he says to *Hermes*, “to you beyond all other gods it is dearest/to be man's companion, and you listen to whom you will.”³ In this passage, *Hermes* is in fact listening to and obeying Zeus' orders, but the line “you listen to whom you will” acknowledges *Hermes*' autonomous agency nonetheless. The preceding statement “to you beyond all other gods it is dearest/to be man's companion” reveals *Hermes*' sympathy to the plight of humankind, and Zeus seems to think that escorting Priam is in accordance with this general sympathy, despite *Hermes*' siding with the Achaeans in the war as a whole.⁴ The *Iliad* describes *Hermes*' acquiescence to his father's orders with a double negative: “he [Zeus] spoke, nor disobeyed him the courier,

1 *Homeric Hymn to Athena*.

2 For one example among many, see *Hermes* guiding the suitors' shades in *Odyssey*, Bk. 24.1-14 .

3 *Iliad*, Bk. 24.334-335.

4 *Ibid.* Bk. 20.35.

Argeiphontes.”⁵ The possibility, however unlikely, that Hermes could choose to do otherwise than obey his father is again expressed obliquely. On the other hand, in the *Odyssey*, when Hermes is sent by Zeus to order Kalypso to allow Odysseus to leave Ogygia, he says to her, “It was Zeus who told me to come here. I did not wish to.”⁶ In the case of Priam, though, we see no indication of such private misgivings, but instead a great degree of personal concern and care for the king of the Trojans.

Hermes' interactions with Priam are characterized by an apparent discrepancy between Priam's foreknowledge that he will have divine guidance and Priam's words and actions—which do not seem to reflect this foreknowledge. Priam's journey to Achilles' camp is initiated by a direct visitation from the goddess Iris, who explicitly tells him: “Let death not be a thought in your heart, you need have no fear/such an escort shall go with you to guide you, Argeiphontes/who will lead you till he brings you to Achilleus.”⁷ When Hekabe attempts to dissuade Priam from his course, however, he does not mention the promised help of Hermes to her, despite describing his communication with Iris in detail.⁸ This seeming secrecy is given no explanation in the narrative, but it reinforces the highly personalized—and even individualized—relationships with humans that Hermes enjoys and which is implied in the phrase “man's companion.”

Hermes appears to Priam in disguise as “a young man, a noble, with beard new grown, which is the most graceful time of young manhood,”⁹ which is almost the same description, word-for-word, of Hermes' appearance to Odysseus in the *Odyssey*.¹⁰ Priam does not recognize the god as such,¹¹ but he does understand that there is a divine force at work: “yet still there is some god who has held his hand above me./who sent such a wayfarer as you to meet me, an omen/of good, for such you are by your form, your admired beauty/and the wisdom in your mind. Your parents are fortunate in you.”¹² Though in this case the “wayfarer” is in fact the god himself, Priam's statement clearly reflects a more common method by which gods help mortals: by guiding their paths to cross those of other mortals who may prove to be helpful.

Hermes, however, provides a more direct form of assistance to Priam: “The kind god spoke, and sprang up behind the horses and into/the chariot, and rapidly caught in his hands the lash and the guide reins./and breathed great strength into the mules and horses.”¹³ This passage parallels the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* where Hermes does not merely pass on the message to Hades that he is to allow Persephone to leave, but personally escorts Persephone from Erebus back to her mother: “She mounted the chariot, and beside her the mighty slayer of Argos/took the reins and whip in his hands/and sped through the halls.”¹⁴ In both cases, Hermes actually drives the chariot, a much more active role than simply keeping an eye on Priam or delivering a message to Hades.¹⁵

5 *Iliad*, Bk. 24.339.

6 *Odyssey*, Bk. 5.99

7 *Iliad*, Bk. 24.181-183.

8 *Ibid.* Bk. 24.217-227.

9 *Ibid.* Bk. 24.347-348.

10 *Odyssey*, Bk. 10.278-279. For a more in-depth examination of Hermes' disguise, see Smith 171.

11 Indeed, he is initially described as “confused” and “badly frightened” in *Iliad* Bk. 24.358-359, and has seemingly forgotten Iris' guarantee of protection entirely.

12 *Iliad*, Bk. 24.372-377.

13 *Ibid.* Bk. 24.440-442.

14 *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 377-379.

15 Cf. Athena acting as Diomedes' charioteer in *Iliad*, Bk. 5.835-841. Comparative studies of charioteers in other

In addition to driving the chariot and giving the horses and mules “great strength,” Hermes magically puts the sentries of the Achaean camp to sleep.¹⁶ He further begins to show hints of his superhuman nature when he opens the door to the Myrmidons' fortification, a door that takes “three Achaians” to open and close, and which only “Achilleus all by himself could close....”¹⁷ It is this feat which Achilles later cites as proof that Priam has received divine assistance. After opening the gate, Hermes reveals his true identity to Priam: “Aged sir, I who come to you am a god immortal,/Hermes. My father sent me down to guide and go with you./But now I am going back again, and I will not go in/before the eyes of Achilleus, for it would make others angry for an immortal god so to face mortal men with favour.”¹⁸ Hermes recognizes that the favoritism he shows Priam would make other mortals angry and so he helps Priam as surreptitiously as possible. This subtlety is hardly surprising coming from a god who was told the day after his birth, “Surely hereafter this shall be your title amongst the deathless gods, to be called the prince of robbers continually,”¹⁹ but it is not secrecy for secrecy's sake: rather, staying out of sight *allows* Hermes to “face mortal men with favour.”

Curiously, in Aeschylus' lost play *The Phrygians* or *The Ransom of Hector*, Hermes does in fact enter Achilles' tent. Drawing on *Iliad* Scholiast X 351, Herbert Weir Smyth notes that in Aeschylus' play, “except at the beginning, and then only in few words, Achilles refused to speak to the god, but sat in silence.”²⁰ This could be seen to refute the significance of Hermes' withdrawal in the *Iliad*, but Achilles' peculiar behavior towards the god rather reaffirms that Hermes' role in Priam's journey is a central one. Indeed, even though he never gets the chance to see Hermes in the *Iliad*, Achilles is aware that “some god” is guiding Priam, and draws attention to this fact.

Achilles' very awareness of this divine intervention is what protects Priam from violence, though Priam is still potentially in danger from the other Myrmidons. Achilles deduces this numinous influence by analyzing the miraculous circumstances of Priam's infiltration of his camp:

I know you, Priam, in my heart, and it does not escape me
that some god led you to the running ships of the Achaians.
For no mortal would dare come to our encampment, not even
one strong in youth. He could not get by the pickets, he could not
rightly unbar the bolt that secures our gateway.²¹

However, since he himself had already received a message from Zeus through his mother,²² Achilles does not become angry at Priam for this reason, as Hermes had suggested might happen. In fact, Achilles was already angry at Priam due to the Trojan King's blunt words: “do not, beloved of Zeus, make me sit on a chair while Hektor/lies yet forlorn.”²³ Achilles' recognition of

Indo-European epics could also prove significant. Hermes is mentioned in a footnote regarding Priam, but his role as charioteer is entirely overlooked in Stagakis 150-151.

16 *Iliad*, Bk. 24.445-446.

17 *Ibid.* Bk. 24.454-456.

18 *Ibid.* Bk. 24.460-464.

19 *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*

20 *Aeschylus: Agamemnon, Libation-Bearers, Eumenides, Fragments (Loeb Classical Library #146)*

21 *Iliad*, Bk. 24.563-567.

22 *Ibid.* Bk. 24. 561-562.

23 *Ibid.* Bk. 24.553-554.

Priam's divine guidance is actually part of his attempt to temper his own anger, restrain himself from violence and thereby avoid becoming "guilty before the god's [i.e. Zeus'] orders."²⁴ By speaking his thought process aloud, of course, Achilles also accomplishes the secondary goal of threatening Priam. The fact that Priam is still in danger while in Achilles' camp is not lost upon Hermes, who is deeply concerned with getting him out: "Now the rest of the gods and men who were lords of chariots/slept nightlong, with the easy bondage of slumber upon them/only sleep had not caught Hermes the kind god, who pondered/now in his heart the problem of how to escort King Priam."²⁵ This description of Hermes' sleepless night provides corroboration for Zeus' earlier description of Hermes as one "to [whom] beyond all other gods it is dearest/to be man's companion." The appellation "the kind god," while perhaps merely included for metrical reasons, is thematically fitting here as well.

Hermes wakes Priam from his sleep and again drives Priam's chariot while shielding him from the eyes of the Achaeans: "Hermes harnessed for them the mules and the horses/and himself drove them through the encampment. And no man knew of them."²⁶ Again, Hermes provides direct rather than indirect assistance. Priam's return journey from a dangerous place, which in Achilles' words "no mortal" would even dare to go to willingly, let alone return from, parallels Hermes escorting Persephone out of Erebos.

Nor is Persephone the only individual that Hermes has helped leave Hades' realm. In the *Odyssey*, the eidolon of Herakles tells Odysseus that when he was tasked with bringing Kerberos to Eurystheus, "I brought the dog up and led him from the realm of Hades,/and Hermes saw me on my way, with Pallas Athene."²⁷ Herakles' successful katabasis and return during his lifetime is contrasted with the fact that after his death, it is merely his "image" that speaks to Odysseus, while he himself has been deified: "I was aware of powerful Herakles;/his image, that is, but he himself among the immortal/gods enjoys their festivals, married to sweet-stepping/Hebe, child of great Zeus and Hera."²⁸ Though Herakles did not become immortal through his return from the realm of Hades, there is clearly a thematic parallel between the fetching of Kerberos and Herakles' eventual apotheosis.

Just as Herakles' lot after death is far better than that of most mortals, so are the afterlives of those initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries: "Blessed is the one of earthly men who has seen these rites./But the man who is uninitiated and without share, never has a portion/of the same privileges when he is dead down in the misty darkness."²⁹ A passage from Pindar even suggests that Persephone sends certain souls back to earth in some form: "Persephone will receive compensation for a penthos of long standing,/the psukhai of these she sends back up, on the ninth year, to the sunlight above,/and from these [psukhai] will grow illustrious kings."³⁰ Thus, Persephone possesses the power to mitigate the "misty darkness" mortals find themselves in after death, or even to send certain souls back to the light of day. The *Odyssey* portrays the Underworld to which Hermes guides souls as a dreary place where Achilles famously proclaims, "I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another/man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on,/than be a king over all the perished dead."³¹ However, if Hermes helped

24 *Iliad*, Bk. 24.568-570.

25 *Ibid.* Bk. 24.677-680.

26 *Ibid.* Bk. 24.690-691.

27 *Odyssey*, Bk. 11.625-626.

28 *Ibid.* Bk. 11.601-604.

29 *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 480-482.

30 Trans. by and quoted in Nagy p. 170.

31 *Odyssey*, Bk. 11.489-491.

Persephone and Herakles in their journeys out from the Underworld, then he is linked by these stories to possible routes of escape from the “misty darkness”: either initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries and the favor of Persephone, or apotheosis following the example of Herakles. This seems to undermine Hermes' role as a psychopomp, but in fact, is a characteristic complexity of the god.

In the *Iliad*, Hermes helps Priam despite siding with the Greeks against the Trojans. In the *Odyssey*, Herakles' successful ascent from Erebus is also credited to Hermes, even though the *Odyssey* also depicts Hermes in his function of guiding souls to the Underworld never to return. Book 24 of the *Iliad* also contains strong parallels with the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* where Hermes provides particularly direct assistance by acting as Persephone's charioteer and escort, just as he does for Priam. In each of these stories, Hermes helps navigate a complex and otherwise untenable situation. Hermes' own alliance with the Greeks and his job of bringing souls to Hades further complicate the situations, but it is through these apparent contradictions that Zeus' words regarding Hermes' personality and agency are shown to be especially insightful: “to you beyond all other gods it is dearest/to be man's companion, and you listen to whom you will.”

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