

Apollo's Bee Maidens in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*

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Abstract: In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, the burlesque conflict between Apollo and the newborn Hermes, which is caused by Hermes' stealing of Apollo's cattle, is resolved through the exchange of gifts between the two brothers. One of Apollo's gifts consists of three maiden-bees, which will endow Hermes with mantic powers. The reason for this association between bees and divination is a vexed issue. I argue that the origin of this connection resides in a pun.

Keywords: *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*; etymology; Bee Maidens; prophesy; Hermes; Apollo.



THE *HOMERIC HYMN TO HERMES*¹ describes the origin of some of Hermes' essential traits and roles in Greek mythology such as being the divine messenger, the god of flocks, rhetoric and persuasion, theft and commerce, and prophecy.² The trickster nature of Hermes is revealed in the central episode of the Hymn, in which, to Zeus' amusement, he enters into a burlesque conflict with Apollo by stealing his brother's cattle. The conflict is solved in a joyful manner. The two brothers exchange gifts. To appease Apollo for the theft, Hermes not only returns the stolen cattle to Apollo, but also offers him the seven-string lyre, which he has just invented by using the shell of a tortoise. In exchange, the appeased Apollo offers Hermes the *caduceus*, a symbol of wealth and fortune, which offers protection from harm. Through his staff Hermes will fulfill the ordinances of Zeus.³ After offering the *caduceus*, Apollo starts teaching Hermes about prophetic powers, of which Apollo is the master.⁴ Unlike Apollo, Hermes will not have full access to the will of Zeus. Thus, he will have only limited prophetic powers. The medium through which Hermes will be able to know the future are three bee-maidens. These maidens can tell the future, especially when they are filled with honey:⁵

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¹ For general studies on the *Hymn*, see Shelmerdine 1981; Richardson 2010; Vergados 2013; Thomas 2020.

² Richardson 2010, 22.

³ Lines 526–31; cf. Richardson 2010, 216; Vergados 2010, 558; Anghelina 2017.

⁴ Lines 537–49.

⁵ There are certain holy ones, sisters born—three virgins gifted with wings: their heads are besprinkled with white meal, and they dwell under a ridge of Parnassus. These are teachers of divination apart from me, the art which I practiced while yet a boy following herds, though my father paid no heed to it.

σεμναὶ γάρ τινες εἰσί, κασίγνηται γεγαυῖαι,
 παρθένοι, ὡκείησιν ἀγαλλόμεναι περύγεσσι,
 τρεῖς· κατὰ δὲ κρατὸς πεπαλαγμένοι ἄλφιστα λευκά
 οἰκία ναιετάουσιν ὑπὸ πτυχί Παρνησοῖο,
 μαντείης ἀπάνευθε διδάσκαλοι ἦν ἐπὶ βουσί
 παῖς ἔτ' ἐὼν μελέτησα· πατὴρ δ' ἐμὸς οὐκ ἀλέγιζεν.
 ἐντεῦθεν δῆπαιτα ποτῶμεναι ἄλλοτε ἄλλῃ
 κηρία βόσκονται καὶ τε κραίνουσιν ἕκαστα.
 αἱ δ' ὅτε μὲν θυίωσιν ἐδηδυῖαι μέλι χλωρόν
 προφρονέως ἐθέλουσιν ἀληθείην ἀγορεύειν·
 ἦν δ' ἀπονοσφισθῶσι θεῶν ἡδεῖαν ἐδωδήν
 ψεύδονται δῆπαιτα δι' ἀλλήλων δονέουσai. (552–63)⁶

The mention of the three bee-maidens in the passage above raises two major difficulties, which have not been satisfactorily solved so far.⁷ The first one concerns the identity of these maidens; the second, the relation between mantic, on the one hand, and bees and honey, on the other.⁸ The point has been made that the passage is deliberately obscure and that its obscurity fits the style of the Delphic oracle.⁹ It has also been noticed that bees are sometimes associated with seers and priests. The priestess of Delphi herself was called “bee”.¹⁰ The bee-maidens have also been related to other similar maidens and nymphs connected to Apollo, such as the Thriae, the three sisters personifying the mantic pebbles used at Delphi, and the Corycian Nymphs on Mount Parnassus. None of these nymphs, however, have ever been associated with bees, nor do the bee-maidens have anything to do with pebbles. There is nothing, therefore, that could connect the bee-maidens in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* to any of these two groups of nymphs. Regardless, however, of whether the bee-maidens could be identified with any other group of three nymphs, so far the relation between bees and prophetic powers has remained intriguing and obscure.

Before trying to address this issue directly, I note that the presence of the bee-maidens in this passage is part of a larger context, which includes the gifts ex-

From their home they fly now here, now there, feeding on honeycomb and bringing all things to pass. And when they are inspired through eating yellow honey, they are willing to speak truth; but if they be deprived of the gods' sweet food, then they speak falsely, as they swarm in and out together. (trans. Evelyn-White).

⁶ Text of the *Hymn*: Càssola 1975.

⁷ General studies: Scheinberg 1979; Larson 1995; Richardson 2010, 219–20; Vergados 2013, 566–70.

⁸ Vergados 2013, 569–70; Larson 1995, 354–57.

⁹ Amandry 1950, 64; Ohlert 1912, 155; Zanetto 1996, 282; Johnston 2008, 51–56; Bowden 2004 49–51; Vergados 2013, 15–22; 567.

¹⁰ Ar. *Ra.* 1273; Call. *Apol.* 110; Porph. *Antr.* 18 etc.; cf. Vergados 2013, 569.

change that occurs between the two brothers. These gifts are, to a certain degree, symbolically equivalent.¹¹ Thus, they share one essential feature, which is their uselessness to the giver. This includes the bee-maidens, whose role should be considered in this larger context.

To exemplify: Hermes offers Apollo the lyre, which Hermes has invented immediately after his birth by using a tortoise shell.¹² The nature of the lyre blatantly contrasts with Hermes' nature. The tortoise is the slowest of the creatures whereas Hermes is the fastest, the god of foot racing.¹³ Music, on the other hand, is for the moments of rest, of which Hermes, as the messenger of the gods, does not have too many since he travels all the time.¹⁴ The lyre, therefore, is completely superfluous to Hermes.

Apollo's other gift, the *caduceus*, is, as Apollo himself states, a symbol of wealth. As such it corresponds to the stolen cattle returned by Hermes to Apollo. Indeed, in Antiquity, the possession of cattle is a well-known sign of wealth.¹⁵ Thus, once Apollo is getting his cattle back the *caduceus* becomes superfluous to him, and Hermes can become the god of wealth.¹⁶

Finally, through the bee-maidens Apollo offers Hermes mantic powers which are superfluous to Apollo since he already knows the mind of Zeus. On the other hand, the nature of the bee-maidens perfectly corresponds to Hermes'. They can tell the truth, but they can also lie and deceive, obviously not unlike Hermes who is the god of thieves and lies.

I now return to the issue of the relation between bees and divination. The solution I propose here concerns more than mere mythology. It pertains to wordplay and folk etymologies, of which the Greeks were very fond.¹⁷ The Greek word for "honey" is *meli* (< *melit). The same word is at the origin of the word for 'bee', *melis*-

¹¹ Heiden 2010, 410–11.

¹² Lines 39–51; Vergados 2013, 258–59; Richardson 2010, 160–61.

¹³ Cf. 43–46: Hermes makes the lyre in the blink of an eye; see Vergados 2013, 263–65; Bungard 2011, 148–49.

¹⁴ In fact, Hermes does sing songs after he builds the lyre (42–52, 414–35), but that is before he is appointed the gods' herald (331, 572); see Vergados 2013, 63, 494.

¹⁵ Cf. *pecunia* from *pecus*; Apollo's cattle are cows (cf. e.g., βόες βοσκόμεναι at 71–72). This would not be surprising since cows in fact produce wealth, that is, milk, calves etc.; cf. *Il.* 20.220–22.

¹⁶ The well-known shape of the top of the *caduceus*, the 'open eight', may represent clover, which is the usual food for cattle in general: cf. 529–30: ῥάβδον χρυσείην τριπέτηλον (τριπέτηλος = 'clover'); cf. Anghelina 2017. In the *Homeric Hymn*, the fodder for Apollo's cattle is called λωτός (107), which is believed to be lotus *corniculatus* or bird's foot trefoil; see Vergados 2013, 318; LSJ, s.v. The association, therefore, is between the shape of the top of *caduceus* (clover), cattle, and wealth.

¹⁷ Cf. Anghelina 2022.

sa (< *melit-ya).¹⁸ Both these words sound very similar in Greek to the word for “future”, which is to *mellon* (< *mellō* < *mel-yō).¹⁹ It is this ‘etymological’ connection that could generate the association between bees and honey, on the one hand, and the future, on the other hand. It could also forge the belief that the more honey the bees ingest, the greater their prophetic powers. And it could even lead to the Pythia at Delphi herself being called ‘the Delphic bee.’²⁰ A special case is the fact that the poets are sometimes also called “bees.”²¹ In this latter case the etymological association is between bees and song (μέλος).²²

As noted above, the association between Hermes and prophetic powers raises the question of what kind of knowledge Apollo offers his brother. Hermes is associated with all sorts of divinatory powers, which include the foretelling of the future through signs.²³ The passage under discussion here seems to show that whatever power Hermes may have to foretell the future, this power is ‘minor’ in comparison to Apollo’s.²⁴ The image of bees and honey perfectly illustrates this idea. The truth of their prophecy is not independent like Apollo’s but depends on the honey they ingest. In other words, their activity is conditioned by honey. This is the meaning of 559, a line which is based on the pun between *κηρία* and *κραίνουσιν*: *κηρία βόσκονται καὶ τε κραίνουσιν ἕκαστα* ‘they feed on honeycombs and accomplish all things.’

An important issue raised by this passage concerns the reason why Hermes has access to mantic powers. The answer to this might be given by the Iliadic scholia cf. n. 23 above). As Zeus’ messenger Hermes indeed has access to Zeus’ will. His knowledge of Zeus’ mind, however, is not like Apollo’s, that is, complete. It strictly depends on the errand he is supposed to do and does not go beyond that.²⁵ Hermes’ wand, therefore, can be rightly called *μαντική*. It reflects the messenger’s limited knowledge of the sender’s mind. The famous rule ‘do not kill the messenger’ might be a

¹⁸ For all these etymologies, see Chantraine 1968–77 s.v.; Beekes 2010.

¹⁹ This meaning is attested in Pi. *Ol.* 2.103 (476 BC). Interestingly, the Homeric Hymn is placed in the late sixth or fifth century; cf. Johnston 2002, 109 n. 1.

²⁰ Pindar (*Pyth.* 4.61) called the Pythia the ‘Delphic Bee’.

²¹ For examples, see Scheinberg (1979) 22–25; cf. Vergados 2013, 19.

²² *Etymological Magnum* (557.15–16) suggests, obviously incorrectly, that μέλι and μέλος are etymologically related; see Scheinberg 1979, 23.

²³ Cf. Apollod. 3.10.2: Hermes receives from Apollo the divination through pebbles; the AD *scholia* to Il. 15.256 call the *caduceus* τὴν μαντικὴν ῥάβδον; an inscription from Perge (*IK* 54, 205) associates Hermes with dice rolling (astragalomancy); there is also Hermes’ oracle at Pharai in Achaia, which Pausanias describes (7.22.2–4); cf. Jaillard 2012, 93–95. This, however, is not surprising; gods express their will through signs (birds etc.).

²⁴ Jaillard 2012, 96.

²⁵ Jaillard 2012, 95, 106.

consequence of this fact.²⁶ The messenger merely delivers the message. The sender is the only person who has access to full knowledge and is fully responsible for the message.²⁷

To sum up: The present study proposes a new solution to the issue of the role and significance of the bee-maidens in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. The connection between these bees and prophecy is based on a pun,²⁸ through which the word for 'honey' *meli-* is associated through folk etymology with the word for 'future' *mellon*. Both these words share the same root *mel-*. Hermes' association with mantic powers, on the other hand, can be explained through his mythological role. As Zeus' messenger, Hermes has access to Zeus' will. This access, however, is not as complete as in Apollo's case, but is strictly limited to the errands Hermes must perform. The bee-maidens, which are probably the creation of the author of the *Homeric Hymn*, allegorically represent this fact. Thus, the nature of the bees is to feed on honeycombs.²⁹ In that case they can speak the truth;³⁰ otherwise they speak falsehood. This perfectly corresponds to Hermes' nature. When he feeds on 'honey', that is, on Zeus' will,³¹ he speaks the truth and, like the bee-maidens with their fast wings, goes across space carried by his own wings and accomplishes each of the tasks he is given. He is the messenger. When he does not fulfill this role, he is, as the *Homeric Hymn* depicts him, a deceptive god – a trickster.³²

²⁶ For this custom, cf. e.g., Hdt. 7.133.2, 7.136.2; Paus. 1.36.3

²⁷ The difference between the oracular skills of the two gods is mainly in quality; cf. Jaillard 2012, 96–8.

²⁸ Μελέτησα (557) might be a part of the wordplay as well.

²⁹ The fact that they are sprinkled with barley (line 554: ἄλφιτα λευκά) might be an allusion to their sacred, Apollinic nature (cf. line 552: σεμναί); the Pythia at Delphi also used barley in her rituals; cf. Plut. *De Pyth. Or.* 397a; *De E* 385c; see Burkert 1983, 122.

³⁰ Cf. 558–59; Jaillard 2012, 95.

³¹ Zeus' well-known epithet of Μελίχιος 'the mild Zeus', might be based on the same pun; see Beekes 2010 s.v. μελίχιος.

³² In Callimachus (*Jov.* 42–50), baby Zeus is taken care of by bees and the nymphs called Μελίαι. The environment is paradisiac, defined by abundance ('milk and honey'; cf. *Exodus* 3:8 and Amalthea's *cornucopia*). The name of the bees in this passage also reflects a pun. This pun, however, is based on the verb μέλω 'take care of'. The Meliai take care of Zeus because they represent one of Ouranos' revenge instruments against Kronos, the other ones being the Erinyes and the Giants who are all born from Ouranos' blood; cf. Hes. *Th.* 185–87, 472–73. Given this, I suggest that the name of the Hesiodic Μελίαι (*Th.* 563), the 'ash-trees', is based on the same pun; the ash-trees (μελίαι) 'take care' of Zeus' thunderbolt (*Th.* 563); cf. West 1966, 323–34; Athanassakis 1983, 43–44.

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