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# The Homeric Hymns

*Irene de Jong*

## Introduction

One of the most important differences between the Homeric epics and the Homeric hymns concerns their respective protagonists. The Homeric epics ‘are not poems about Gods but about human beings. These human beings inhabit a world of which the Gods are an unquestioned part, but still, within each epic, the Gods are there to illuminate, comment on and contrast with the depiction of human actions and the human condition.’<sup>1</sup> In the Homeric hymns the situation is the reverse: these are poems about gods, who inhabit a world ‘to which mortals are admitted only as a kind of witnesses’.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the gods’ actions always have major consequences for mortals. Thus, almost all hymns are to a greater or lesser degree aetiological, the mortal narrator explaining the origin of religious institutions or rituals, most notably the Eleusinian Mysteries (*HDem.*) or the oracle at Delphi (*HAp.*), to his mortal narratees. But the central concern of the hymnic genre is the celebration of a god or goddess, and this has clear consequences for the forms and functions of characterization, as this chapter will set out to show.

## Explicit and Metonymical Characterization

The Homeric Hymns typically focus on one eponymous god or goddess, while the *Hymn to Hermes* also pays lavish attention to Apollo, and the *Hymn to Pan* to Hermes. These divine protagonists interact with other Olympian gods, nymphs (Telphousa), personified places (Delos) or mortals. The mortal characters are sometimes ‘upper-class’ heroic individuals known from mythology (Anchises in the *HApr.*; Metanira, Celeus, Iambe, Triptolemus, Diocles, Eumolpus and Polyxenus in the *HDem.*) but more often ‘lower-class’ anonymous collectives

1 Kearns 2004: 7.

2 Parker 1991: 2.

(Cretan sailors in *HAp.* or Tyrsenic sailors in *HDion.*)<sup>3</sup> or individuals (an old man at Onchestus in *HHerm.* or a mortal man in Arcadia in *HPan.*). These ordinary people allow easy identification for the narratees, a crucial aspect of hymns (see the section on the ‘development’ of hymnic divine characters below).

All gods, not only the central hymned one, are explicitly characterized. This starts with the attributive part<sup>4</sup> that lists, at the opening of the hymn, the powers and attributes of the eponymous god, e.g. *HApr.* 1–6:

Muse, tell me the works of Aphrodite rich in gold, the Cyprian, who arouses sweet desire in gods and subdues the peoples of mortal men, and the birds that fly in heaven and all the wild beasts, as many as the mainland or sea nurture. All of them are concerned with the works of fair-garlanded Cytherea.<sup>5</sup>

The essential nature and character of the eponymous god is then illustrated through a narrative in which the god both characterizes himself through his words and deeds and is explicitly characterized by the hymnic narrator, often, as in the Homeric epics (→), through epithets, which in the hymns typically occur in series, e.g. *HDem.* 30–32:

Her [Persephone] against her will her father’s brother [Hades] carried off with his immortal steeds by Zeus’ design, the Major General, the Hospitable One, Cronus’ son whose names are many.<sup>6</sup>

Gods are also characterized by their fellow gods, e.g. *HHerm.* 282–288 (Apollo is addressing Hermes):

‘My dear sly swindler, I reckon you will often be burgling well-built houses by night and leaving more than one man sitting on the floor as you rob his

3 I largely concentrate on the six larger Homeric hymns: *HDem.* (number 2 in West’s Loeb edition), *HAp.* (3), *HHerm.* (4), *HApr.* (5), *HDion.* (7), and *HPan.* (19), since they have a narrative part of some length. Translations are my own but often largely based on those of Martin West in the Loeb.

4 For the different parts of a hymn (invocation—attributive part—narrative—salutation), see Janko 1981 and *SAGN* 1: 35 (Nünlist).

5 Cf. *HAp.* 2–13; *HPan.* 2–27. For the disputed interpretation of the gnomic aorists in some of these passages, see Faulkner 2005 (with older literature).

6 For the accumulation of epithets in hymns, see Richardson 1974: *ad* 31.

house without a sound, to judge from the way you talk. And you will vex many herdsmen who sleep in the open air in mountain glens, whenever you crave meat and come upon their cattle herds and their flocks of sheep.<sup>7</sup>

The abundant explicit characterization in the Homeric hymns, which makes them markedly different from the more covert Homeric epics, is most likely due to their close relationship with cultic hymns and prayers. In prayers gods are traditionally addressed by appealing to their characteristics, as e.g. in Hom. *Il.* 16.233–235:

‘Lord Zeus, Dodonian, Pelasgian, you who live far away and rule over wintry Dodona. And the Selli live around you, your prophets, men with unwashed feet who sleep on the ground.’<sup>8</sup>

Next to explicit characterization, metonymical characterization plays a major role in the hymnic narratives: cult places (Eleusis, Delphi, Delos, Paphos), favourite haunts (Apollo: peaks, rivers, headlands and harbours; Hermes: mountainous pastures and plains), typical attributes (lyre, bow) and physiognomy (the smile of Aphrodite *philommeidēs*; the tallness and beauty of gods: *HApfr.* 172–175; *HDem.* 275–280; *HDion.* 3–5) all contribute to the narratees’ understanding of a god.<sup>9</sup>

The explicit and metonymical characterization of the Homeric hymns recurs in the hymns that are, by way of *mise en abyme*, embedded in them, e.g. *HPan* 5–7:

[nymphs tread summits] invoking Pan, the god of pastures, resplendent in his hair, squalid, who has as his lot every snowy hill, the peaks of mountains, and rocky tracks.<sup>10</sup>

7 Cf. 155–161, 336–339, 436; *HDem.* 268–269; *HApfr.* 258–272 (Aphrodite describes the nymphs of Mount Ida).

8 See Furley and Bremer 2001: 1–64 (esp. 41–43 for the Homeric hymns).

9 For cult places, attributes and favourite haunts, see *SAGN* 3: 39–43 (de Jong).

10 Cf. *HAp.* 158–164 (Deliads hymn Apollo, Leto, and Artemis); *HHerm.* 57–61 (Hermes sings a hymn to himself), 428–433 (Hermes sings hymns to the Olympian gods); *HPan* 27–47 (nymphs sing hymns to Hermes and Pan); and cf. the Muses’ songs in the hymnic opening of Hes. *Theogony*. Discussions of the two inset hymns of *HPan* in Thomas 2011.

This ploy of the *mise en abyme* suggests a continuity between hymnic performances of the past (here: by nymphs) and the present (by the hymnic narrator), and thereby adds to the idea, also conveyed by the omnitemporal present tenses of the attributive parts, that the immortal gods are eternally the same. The gods are, therefore, by definition static characters. But most hymns recount a form of development all the same.

### The 'Development' of Hymnic Divine Characters

Gods never die, but the *theogonic* tradition in Greek literature makes their birth, followed by their arrival on Olympus and acquisition of their *timai*—the powers for which they are honoured—central themes of Homeric hymns.<sup>11</sup> The centrality of these theogonic themes appears from the fact that one of the first 'hymns' sung by Hermes on his newly invented lyre has as its subject 'the immortal gods and dark Earth, how they were born and how each received his share (sc. of divine *timai*)' (*HHerm.* 427–428).

The first part of the *Hymn to Apollo* recounts Apollo's birth (*in casu*, the long search by his mother Leto for a place to give birth) and his first words, which immediately make his *timai* clear: 'I want the lyre and the curved bow as my attributes. And I shall prophesy Zeus' unerring will to humankind' (131–132).<sup>12</sup> His arrival on Olympus is, perhaps, evoked in two scenes (1–13 and 186–206): in the first the other gods react with fear at the sight of his bow, and in the second the gods dance and sing to the tunes of his lyre.<sup>13</sup> The two scenes show him exercising two of his three *timai* (archery and music/dance) and wielding his stock attributes, without his acquisition of them having been recounted. The second part of the *Hymn to Apollo* does tell of the acquisition of a *timē*, Apollo's status as god of prophecy. After a long search he finds his oracle in Delphi, selects his ministers, and (perhaps) gives his first oracle.<sup>14</sup> In this

11 For the theme of the acquisition (or readjustment) of *timai* in the Homeric hymns, see esp. Clay 1989 and 2011. She argues that the hymns fill in the gap between the Homeric epics, where the Olympian pantheon is stable and in full swing, and Hesiod's *Theogony*, which recounts the genesis of that pantheon.

12 Like all gods, Apollo displays a miraculous speed of growth; cf. *HHerm.* 17–18.

13 For discussion whether one or both scenes evoke Apollo's *first* arrival on Olympus, see *SAGN* 3: 40 n. 3 (de Jong).

14 Chappell 2006: 333 has suggested that Apollo's threatening words to his Cretan ministers at 540–543, rather than referring to a specific historical event (the First Sacred War), is 'deliberately vague, perhaps appropriately oracular'.

narrative the god also uses his bow (to shoot the serpent 'Pytho': 301–302) and dances (513–516).

In the *Hymn to Pan* nymphs sing a hymn about Pan, in which his conception by Hermes in Arcadia, his birth by the daughter of Dryops, and his arrival on Olympus are recounted (32–47).

The most elaborate instance of the birth-theme is found in the *Hymn to Hermes*, the narrative of which starts with Hermes' birth, and then shows this 'illegitimate' son of Zeus having to work harder than other gods to get to the Olympus and acquire his *timai*. Much of the humour of the narrative derives from Hermes both acting and not acting like a child and both stressing and denying that he is one (cf. 21, 40, 52, 150–153, 163–165, 237–242, 254, 267–268, 293–296, 305–306, 331, 336, 376, 388). His progress is charted by the gradual upgrading of his birthplace, from a cave (6) into a 'temple' (246–251),<sup>15</sup> but above all by his epithets.<sup>16</sup>

At the moment of his birth the narrator calls Hermes 'resourceful, cunning, a robber, a rustler of cattle, a bringer of dreams, a watcher by night and a gate-lurker' (13–15). His resourcefulness is immediately demonstrated by his invention of the lyre, while his cunning and thieving nature come to the fore in his nightly (cf. 67, 68, 97, 141, 155–156) theft of Apollo's cattle (cf. 136) and his trick of making the cattle walk backwards and himself using special sandals (cf. 76). Upon his return from this nightly exploit, his mother greets him with the following words: 'What are you up to, wily one, where have you been in the night-time, clad in shamelessness?' (155–156), whereby her 'wily one' (*poikilomēta*) mirrors the narrator's 'cunning' (*haimulomētēn*) of 13. In his answer Hermes voices his ambitions to get to Olympus and acquire *timai* (166–173):

'I am going to embark on the finest of arts, looking after me and you for ever. We won't put up with staying here and being without offerings or prayers alone of all the immortals, as you are suggesting. It is better to spend every day in pleasant chat among the gods, with wealth and riches and substance, than to sit at home in a gloomy cave. As for my honour (*timēs*), I shall acquire the same worship as Apollo has.'

If Zeus will not give him those honours, he will become 'the prince of thieves' (175) and even burgle Apollo's temple in Delphi.

15 See *SAGN* 3: 42–43 (de Jong).

16 The following discussion is based on Greene 2005.

His claim is fulfilled sooner than expected. Apollo, having found out about Hermes' theft of his cattle, comes to the cave, addresses him as 'my dear sly swindler' (282), and announces that his privilege (*geras*, more or less the same as *timē*) among gods will be to be known as 'the prince of thieves' (292).

They go to the Olympus to have the case of Hermes' theft tried there. Zeus refers to Hermes as 'this newborn child with the build of a herald', and thereby announces one of his other *timai*, that of messenger of the gods (cf. e.g. *Il.* 24.332–345). In his report of the theft Apollo more than once stresses Hermes' thieving nature and calls him 'a thoroughgoing plunderer type' (336). Hermes emphatically denies being 'a rustler of cattle' (377), but his equally emphatic announcement that he will speak the truth alerts the narratees, who know his true nature (and the true course of events), to his deceit. Zeus, too, of course sees through Hermes' lies and good-humouredly focalizes him as a 'wicked boy' (389). He orders Hermes and Apollo to go back to the scene of the crime, with Hermes, 'the go-between' (*diaktoron*: 392), leading the way. Of course, this role is related to the fact that only Hermes can tell where the cows are hidden, but Zeus' use (in indirect speech) of Hermes' stock epithet *diaktoros* (*Il.* 2.103; *Od.* 1.84, etc.) suggests that he is growing into his status as Olympian god.

Hermes gives back the cattle but of course cannot bring back to life the two cows he has slaughtered. In order to pacify Apollo he starts playing his lyre. The epithets that Apollo now bestows on him acquire a new and more positive tone: 'Killer of cows, ingenious inventor, busy companion of the meal' (436). Eager to get this lyre, Apollo promises Hermes to introduce him on Olympus and, still calling him 'thief' (*philēta*), also for the first time addresses him as 'son of Zeus (and Maia)' (446, again at 455). Hermes gives his brother the lyre and claims for himself the role of god of fertility of herds and flocks (491–495). When he arrives at the Olympus again, now officially, the narrator refers to Apollo and him as 'the very beautiful children of Zeus' (504). But Apollo is not yet quite at ease. Addressing Hermes as a 'cunning go-between' (*diaktore poikilomēta*: 514) he asks for an oath that he will never steal from him again, since he has the Zeus-given *timē* of 'performing property-switching' (516–517). We see that Hermes' status as a 'robber' (cf. 13) and 'prince of thieves' (cf. 175, 292) has now been ratified and has become his official *timē*.

Having received the promise, Apollo gives Hermes the famous golden wand which will become his stock attribute (529–530), as is indicated right away by the god addressing him as brother 'with the golden wand' (*khrusorrhapi*, cf. *Od.* 5.87). He also calls Hermes a 'courser-deity among the gods' (551), once more referring to his *timē* as a messenger of the gods, offers him ownership of three prophetic sisters on Mt. Parnassus (533–566) and announces that he

will be god of cattle and flocks (567–568), as Hermes had wished for (491–495). Soon after Zeus ratifies (in indirect speech) Hermes' acquisition of this *timē* and another one: he will 'be lord over all flocks' and 'envoy to Hades' (569–573). The narrator concludes the narrative with a final reference to Hermes' status as god of thieves (576–578):

He [Hermes] consorts with all mortals and immortals. Rarely he benefits them, but indiscriminately through the dark night he cheats the peoples of mankind.

The omnitemporal present tenses underscore that this status is now permanent.

A variant of the theme of the acquisition of *timai* is found in the *Hymn to Demeter*, where we hear about the adjustment of the goddess' powers. At the start of the narrative Demeter's *timē* is to foster (agricultural) fertility (cf. her epithets *aglaokarpon*, 'with resplendent fruits': 4 and *hōrēphore aglaodōre*, 'bringer of resplendent gifts in season'). Pining for her daughter who has been abducted by Hades, Demeter withholds her power to bring crops (305–309). At last Zeus approves the giving back of her daughter and promises her any *timai* she wishes as compensation for her suffering (460–462). We are not told explicitly what these new *timai* are, but they are probably the Eleusinian Mysteries or the interweaving of Hades and Olympus, with Persephone being queen of Hades but also participating in the assembly of gods on Olympus and the power of Demeter extending to Hades through her provision of mortals after death.<sup>17</sup>

In the *Hymn to Aphrodite*, finally, we see a *timē*, Aphrodite's power to unite gods and mortals in love, curtailed. At the beginning of the narrative Zeus, one of Aphrodite's most frequent 'victims', decides to turn the tables on this goddess and, making her herself fall in love with a mortal and conceive a child, put an end to her boasting about her power over all gods (46–52). At the end of the narrative, Aphrodite herself draws the conclusion that she will no longer pride herself on her ability to couple gods and immortals (252–255).<sup>18</sup>

17 For the first option, see e.g. Clay 1989: 261–263; for the second, Jaillard 2005.

18 Some scholars argue that Aphrodite here says that she will stop coupling gods and mortals altogether, thereby ending the era of the heroes, offspring of gods and mortals; see van der Ben 1986: 33; Clay 1989: 165–166, 183, 192–193; and Olson 2012: 29. In my view, if this were the message of this hymn it would have been made explicit.



The themes of a god's birth,<sup>19</sup> arrival on the Olympus and acquisition of power turns the hymns into texts that 'tell how gods *came to be* what mortals know them as' and thus presents a uniquely dynamic view of the gods.<sup>20</sup> Another hymnic theme allows mortals, both the mortal characters in the narrative and the mortal narratees, even to get close to the gods: epiphany.

### Epiphany as a Characterizing Device

Meetings between gods and mortals, whereby the god assumes a human (in hymns also bestial) identity which he or she sheds at the end of the meeting or which is somehow seen through by the mortal, are a regular part of both epic and hymnic narrative.<sup>21</sup> The moment of the god displaying his or her true identity (epiphany) in the Homeric hymns is much more prominent than in Homer: in Homer only 4 out of 24 meetings between gods and mortals involve—briefly described—epiphanies (Athena: Achilles in *Il.* 1.193–222; Aphrodite: Helen in *Il.* 3.383–420; Athena: Odysseus in *Od.* 13.288–313 and 16.157–177), whereas 4 of the 6 longer hymns have an epiphany and most have even more than one.<sup>22</sup> There is also a difference in the effect of the encounter: in the epics the gods merely help the plot to develop (e.g. Athena/'Mentes' encouraging Telemachus to go out and look for information about his father: *Od.* 1.96–324), while in the hymns the encounter between god and mortals has everlasting results: a temple, altar, festival or heroic lineage. This turns epiphany into *the* central event of most hymnic narratives.<sup>23</sup> Taking my cue from this observation, I will argue that epiphanies are a major form of characterization, and a highly important one at that, since as Platt 2011 has argued convincingly, humans in the real world can only know the invisible gods by means of verbal or visual representations and

19 For another (brief) instance of the birth-theme, see the *Hymn to Athena* (number 28).

20 Parker 1991: 2, my italics.

21 For such scenes in Homeric epic, see de Jong 2001: *ad* 1.96–324, with literature (to which should be added Turkeltaub 2007); in the Homeric hymns, Bremer 1975: 1–12; Sowa 1984: 236–261; Garcia 2002; (in *HHerm.*) Vergados 2011; (in *HDion.*) Jaillard 2011.

22 *HPan* is the only hymn without any reference to a meeting between god and mortal. *HHerm.* has encounters between Hermes and Apollo with the old man at Onchestus but lacks an epiphany. For the suggestion that the *HHerm.* in fact is an indirect epiphany in that the god's works are not only described but also enacted within the hymn's performance, see Vergados 2011.

23 Cf. Bremer 1975: 2: 'Die göttliche Erscheinung steht im Mittelpunkt der *homerischen Hymnen*.' See also Kearns 2004: 71–72 and Parker 1991: 2.

for these representations to be ‘compelling and trustworthy they must derive their value and authority from a perceived potentiality for direct engagement with the divine’.<sup>24</sup> The epiphanies within the hymns at the same time construct and confirm the shape of the eponymous gods.

In the *Hymn to Dionysus* Dionysus takes on the mortal disguise of a ‘youth in first manhood’ with ‘beautiful black locks’ waving about him (3–5). Tyrsenian pirates, who take him to be the son of a king (11), seize him, but when they try to bind him, he gives a display of his divine powers (a first, partial epiphany): the osiers fall clear away from his hands and feet. Only one of the pirates, the helmsman, realizes that they are dealing with a god: ‘This is either Zeus, or Apollo with the silver bow, or Poseidon; he is not like mortal men but like the gods who dwell on Olympus’ (19–21). He suggests that the prisoner should be released but the captain and other pirates persist in their plan to sell him. The god then gives a second display of his power, now specifically as god of wine: he makes wine flow over the ship and vine and ivy grow on the mast (34–42). This time all pirates react with the amazement and fear typical of divine epiphany (37, 48), but the angry god does not stop there. Taking on the shape of a lion he seizes (and presumably devours) the captain. His disguise as (or metamorphosis into) a lion at the same time reveals his true nature, in that Dionysus is a god who can take on theriomorphic shapes (at least in the eyes of mortals who are under his influence: see e.g. *E. Ba.* 920–921). The other mariners leap into the sea and are changed into dolphins, but the helmsman is spared and becomes witness to the god’s full epiphany: ‘I am loud-roaring Dionysus, whom Cadmus’ daughter Semele bore after mingling in love with Zeus’ (56–57).

In the *Hymn to Apollo*, Apollo, taking on the shape of a dolphin, leaps onto the ship of Cretans whom he has chosen to become the ministers of his oracle in Delphi (400–401). The reaction of the sailors (amazement and fear: 404, 415) suggests that they realize that they are dealing not with an ordinary animal (416–417). Apollo appearing to the men in the shape of a dolphin thus is a first, partial epiphany, and, as in the case of Dionysus the lion, the shape chosen characterizes Apollo. For as the god himself later explains (493–496):

‘Even as I originally leapt onto your speedy ship in the misty sea in the form of a dolphin, so you are to pray to me as ‘the Dolphin god’, and the altar itself [which he has just ordered them to build on the shore] will be ‘Delphian’ and it will be visible for ever.’

24 Platt 2011: 53. Her whole first chapter on ‘framing epiphany in art and text’, esp. pp. 60–76, has been highly illuminating for writing my chapter.

We see that divine disguises in the Homeric hymns differ from those in the Homeric epics: in the latter gods choose a disguise that suits their addressee (e.g. Athena taking on the identity of a friend of Nausicaa at *Od.* 6.22–23), in the hymns one that suits their true nature.

Apollo then performs a second divine feat: with his breath he effortlessly steers the ship to Crisa, Delphi's port. The omniscient hymnic narrator leaves no doubt about Apollo's (and Zeus') role (427–428, 437), but for the time being records no reaction of the Cretan sailors. How they interpret what happens to them will become clear only later. When they have landed in Crisa Apollo leaves the ship and quickly goes back and forth to his temple in Delphi (the building of which had been recorded earlier in the narrative: 294–299) in a second partial epiphany: he first moves like a star in broad daylight and later lights a flame in the sanctum of his temple (440–444). The women of Crisa react with the fear typical of an epiphany (447), but they also raise a ritual cry (*ololuxan*: 445) and thereby already act as his followers. Light and splendour are common elements in divine epiphany, but they are also special characteristics of Apollo, as is indicated by the narrator at 444 (he lit a flame 'making manifest his signs of divine power') and as appeared earlier at 202–203, when dancing and playing his lyre 'splendour shines about him, and [bright is] the flashing of his feet and well-spun tunic'. Once again, his disguise (a star) suits, indeed reveals his nature.

Apollo, having prepared the temple for the arrival of the ministers who are going to live and work there, returns to the ship and the Cretan sailors, now in the shape of a 'sturdy yeoman in his first prime, his hair falling over his broad shoulders' (449–450). This disguise of Apollo much resembles that of Dionysus at the beginning of the narrative of *HDion.* and sculptures of Apollo in the actual Greek world. Thus it seems to be the mortal shape coming closest to how Greeks thought male gods looked like, and Apollo's disguise is arguably an epiphany. Indeed, the Cretan sailors seeing the youth realize that he is a god and their leader says: 'Stranger, as you do not at all resemble a mortal in body and stature but rather resemble the immortal gods, I bid you all hail and may the gods grant you blessings' (464–466). Looking back on the event of their strange arrival in Crisa, he now detects a divine hand there too: 'now we have landed without our ship, against our will, longing to go home, by another route and by other ways, but one of the gods brought us here, without us wishing it' (471–473). Whether this was their opinion at the moment the mysterious sea voyage took place or is only due to progressive insight must remain open. Finally, Apollo reveals his identity to them: 'I am the son of Zeus and I declare to be Apollo' (480).

In the *Hymn to Aphrodite*, Aphrodite, smitten by Zeus with love for the mortal Anchises, first makes herself as beautiful as possible in Paphos (58–

63) and then presents herself to Anchises in the shape of a highly attractive mortal maiden, a disguise which both suits her identity as goddess of love and her intention to seduce him. But her plan threatens to misfire, since Anchises takes her for a goddess (84–95):

Anchises, seeing her took stock and was amazed at her build, height, and shining clothes. For the dress which she wore was brighter than fire, and she wore twisted bracelets and shining ear-rings, and around her tender neck there were very beautiful necklaces, fair, of gold, and elaborately wrought. Like the moon it shone around her tender breasts, a wonder to behold. And desire gripped Anchises, and he addressed her: 'Hail, Lady, whoever you are of the blessed ones that arrive at this dwelling, Artemis, or Leto or golden Aphrodite or fair-born Themis or owl-eyed Athena or perhaps you came here one of the Charites, ...'

Aphrodite's disguise, thus, ironically works out as a partial epiphany.<sup>25</sup> In order to achieve what she as goddess of love wants to achieve, to go to bed with Anchises, she has to deny her divine identity, for mortals fear to make love to gods (cf. 83 and Anchises' later panic after she has revealed her true identity, 181–183). Hence, she goes on to back up her physical disguise with an invented biography as a Phrygian princess and at the same time exercising her power as goddess of love manages to persuade Anchises to go to bed with her, although, as the narrator notes, he does 'not know for sure' whether she is a mortal or not (167). After the deed Aphrodite resumes her immortal shape and appears to Anchises in a full epiphany (172–175):

Having dressed herself well all around her body, bright goddess, she stood in the steading, and her head touched the well-fashioned roof, and from her cheeks shone beauty, divine, such as belongs to fair-crowned Cytherea.

Anchises recognizes her as a goddess (perhaps but not necessarily as Aphrodite) and panics (183–190):

And he covered his handsome face back again in his blanket, and begging her spoke winged words: 'At once when I first saw you, goddess, with my eyes, I knew you were a god; but you did not speak the truth. But

25 Cf. Faulkner 2008: *ad* 83–90: 'partial epiphany is in fact what is happening here'.

now I beseech you by Zeus holding the aegis: do not leave me to dwell among men as an enfeebled creature, but have pity. For a man loses his procreative forces, who goes to bed with immortal goddesses.'

Aphrodite reassures him and at the end of a long speech also, rather obliquely, reveals her name (287).

The most complex epiphany is that in the *Hymn to Demeter*. When Demeter, travelling the earth in search for her daughter Persephone, arrives in Eleusis, she assumes the shape of 'an ancient woman, who is debarred from motherhood and the gifts of garland-loving Aphrodite, a woman like those who are nurses to the children of lawgiving kings or housekeepers in bustling houses' (101–104). This mortal disguise suits (1) her status as mother-goddess, (2) perhaps her role in the Eleusinian mysteries, where a child is born to the goddess,<sup>26</sup> and (3) of course her ensuing role in the hymnic narrative, when she will become the nurse of the son of the royal family of Eleusis, Demophon. The first mortals who meet her, the four daughters of the king, do not recognize her, as the narrator explicitly notes (111). But when she, upon their invitation and after having offered them her services as a nurse, enters the palace, a partial epiphany takes place (188–190):

then Demeter stepped onto the threshold; and her head touched the roof, and she filled the doorway with divine radiance. She [queen Metanira] was seized by awe and reverence and pale fear.

We have all the ingredients of an epiphany (height and radiance of god, awe and fear of a mortal), yet in the ensuing dialogue Metanira addresses Demeter as a mortal and nowhere appears to suspect that she might be a god and Demeter answers as a mortal, without revealing her divine identity. Why this partial epiphany which does not influence the plot (as it does in other cases)? For one thing, for the story to develop as it does, Metanira must not know that the old woman is a goddess. But to achieve this effect the narrator might simply have said that the queen, like her daughters, did not recognize the goddess. My suggestion is that since the ensuing section—in which the goddess is received

26 For a discussion of Demeter's nursing of Demophon as an *aition* for part of the ritual of the Mysteries, see Richardson 1974: *ad* 231–255 and update in Richardson 2011: 50–53. Parker 1991: 9–10 sees the event as motivation for the institution of the Mysteries as a whole: 'Deprived of all hopes of immortality (Demophon stands for us all), we are reduced to seeking to improve our prospects for the afterlife by rites.'

in the household of Metanira and Celeus—has an important aetiological function, reflecting as it does the preliminary ritual of the Mysteries,<sup>27</sup> the epiphany is aimed *at the narratees* and serves to remind them of Demeter's true, divine status.

As a result of her not recognizing the goddess, the queen misinterprets Demeter's placing Demophon into the fire (in order to immortalize him) and interrupts her beneficial work. Now the angry goddess reveals her true identity (268–269):

‘I am Demeter the honoured one, who is the greatest boon and joy to immortals and mortals.’

Her verbal epiphany is followed by a visual one, the fullest in the Homeric epics and hymns (275–280):

After these words the goddess changed her form and stature, thrusting old age away; beauty wafted all about her. And a lovely fragrance spread from her scented dress, and a radiance shone afar from the immortal body of the goddess; flaxen locks grew down over her shoulders, and the sturdy house was filled with a brilliance of lightning.

As we have seen, radiant light is a stock element of epiphanies, but the stress on light here might also reflect the importance of light for the Mysteries: at the climax of the ceremonies there was the blaze of many torches in the night.

We may conclude that epiphanies play a central role in the characterization of gods in the Homeric hymns. Firstly, the disguises or shapes adopted by the gods at the start of their meetings with men suit their nature and thereby as much reveal as disguise them. Secondly, the moment of epiphany itself is instrumental to the encomiastic aim of hymns, showing as it does the god in his or her full splendour. Making the onlookers of that epiphany not heroes or heroines, as in the Homeric epics, but ordinary people offers the narratees of the hymn a point of reference to identify with and thereby to become, vicariously, witness of the narrated epiphany themselves. The narrated epiphany as it were forms a *mise en abyme* of the epiphany *the hymn itself* is supposed to bring about: the hymn is a gift that the hymnic singer offers, on behalf of a group of people or community, to the god, who is supposed to come and give some form of blessing or help in return for the gift, as the customary salutation

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27 For the aetiological nature of this section, see Richardson 1974: *ad* 192–211.

at the end of hymns make clear.<sup>28</sup> The representation of an epiphany inside the hymn helps its listeners to make that epiphany happen (in their fantasy or projected on a cult image).<sup>29</sup>

### Moral Evaluation of Hymnic Characters

Hymns being encomia of gods, these gods are, of course, never held up for moral scrutiny. Indeed, even the greatest rascal of all, Hermes, is smiled upon by Zeus (though not by his direct victim Apollo), who vindicates his stealing and lying by making clear that these are this god's *timai*.<sup>30</sup> The mortal characters of the hymns are occasionally evaluated by the narrator (Metanira's spying on Demeter is called 'folly', *aphradiēisin*: *HDem.* 243; the Phlegyae are called 'hybristic men, who disregard Zeus': *HAp.* 278–279) or other characters (Metanira is reviled by Demeter: *HDem.* 256–258, who also uses the word 'folly', *aphradiēisin*; the Tyrsenian pirates by one of their fellow-pirates: *HDion.* 17; and Eos by Aphrodite: *HAphr.* 223; the Cretan sailors/ministers are gently reproached by Apollo: *HAp.* 532–533; and Anchises is warned by Aphrodite not to boast 'with foolish mind', *aphroni tumōi*: *HAphr.* 286).

The hymns do not teach lessons on the basis of the acts of individuals, but they do contain evaluations of the nature of mortals as a collective. Gods and men need each other (men need gifts of the gods like agriculture and prophesy and gods crave the cult and sometimes the physical love of men), but the two worlds and lives are strictly separate. Man cannot become immortal (Demophon) or if he does the experiment is unsuccessful (Tithonus: *HAphr.* 218–238), the one favourable exception being Ganymede (*HAphr.* 202–217). The gulf separating their worlds is symbolized by the dramatic growth of the gods' size at the moment of epiphany, which threatens to exceed the dimensions of the mortals' houses, and the physical reactions of fear, speechlessness or averting of eyes on the part of the mortals. It is, perhaps, most poignantly

28 Note esp. the *khairē* of these salutations, which perhaps is not so much a farewell as a greeting. For the idea that hymns work towards the hymned god's epiphany, see Depew 2000: 73–74; Garcia 2002; Vergados 2011: 85–86; Thomas 2011: 164; and Platt 2011: 61–62.

29 Platt 2011: 68–70 rightly points out, however, that even the epiphanies in the Homeric hymns do not describe in detail how *the bodies* of the gods look: the narrator focuses on their clothes or jewellery but stops at the moment these are taken off or makes the mortal interlocutors avert their eyes.

30 For Delos' enigmatic qualification of Apollo as *atasthalon*, '(potentially) violent' at *HAp.* 67, see N.J. Richardson 2010: ad loc.

illustrated by the fact that the mortals' *condition humaine* is for the gods no more than a song to entertain themselves with (*HAp.* 190–193):

(the Muses) sing of all the gods' divine gifts and of human sufferings, which they have from the immortal gods and live witless and helpless, and they cannot find a remedy for death or a defence against old age.

If mortals can never become immortal they can, however, benefit from the gods; for this they must show themselves faithful followers. Thus hymnic narratives end with an indication of the 'blessedness' of the god's followers (*HDem.* 480–483, cf. *meg' olbios*; *HDion.* 54: cf. *panolbion*) or, conversely, the pronouncement by the god of a curse for those who do *not* behave properly towards him (*HHermes* 577–578; *HAp.* 540–543), or a comical inversion of the theme (*HHermes* 577–578: Hermes brings mortals *no profit*).

### Conclusion

The Homeric hymns are encomia that narrate the *timai* and *erga* of individual gods, often as they are being exercised for the first time after birth. They are, therefore, to a large degree characterizing: the attributive sections, the prolific use of epithets, the gods' fitting anthropomorphic or theriomorphic disguises, and above all the narratives themselves (the god of theft stealing cattle, the goddess of love falling in love, the goddess of agriculture giving or withholding crops, the god of music dancing and playing his lyre) all present detailed and compelling pictures of the gods hymned.

The hymns are an important complement to the Homeric epics where the 'invention' of the Greek gods about which Herodotus speaks is concerned: Demeter and Dionysus do not or hardly figure in the epics, Hermes and Aphrodite only make fleeting appearances, while Apollo's Delphic and prophetic aspect is only briefly touched upon (*Od.* 8.79–81).<sup>31</sup>

The epiphanies in which most hymnic narratives culminate bring the gods close, not only to the characters inside the narrative but also to the mortal narratees of the hymns. They present in narrative form the meeting of god and mortals that the hymn itself aspires to; it is hoped that the god will listen to

31 To what extent divine characters in Greek literature have the same flexible personality as mortal ones, i.e. appear differently in different texts, is a question which merits further investigation.



the hymn and will come to accept it as his gift. If I quoted in my introduction Parker's remark that mortals are only admitted as witnesses in the hymns, we may now revise that remark and leave out the 'only': the mortal characters' role as witnesses is absolutely crucial in understanding the construction of divine character in the hymns.