

# HERMES and HESTIA: TRANSITIONS and CROSSROADS

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## Gods of the Threshold

*Come, both of you inhabit this beautiful house  
with mutual feelings of friendship.  
You accompany good work with intelligence and youth.<sup>1</sup>*

- The Homeric Hymn to Hestia

The pairing of Hermes and Hestia may seem unusual in that the younger god is a trickster and thief, while Hestia the eldest of the Olympians is graceful and pure. In the *Homeric Hymn to Hestia* they are portrayed together as deities who preside over the crossing of thresholds. Hermes is the outer traveller while Hestia is the inner. Ginette Paris expresses their relationship astutely:

Hestia and Hermes together form an association of opposites, the former refusing to leave the centre and the latter being the God of communications and travel. They are not a husband and wife couple for the territory of Hestia ends precisely where that of Hermes begins (that is, at the door of the house). A conjugal relationship between them would be impractical; the presence of one excludes that of the other. Nevertheless in *The Homeric Hymn to Hestia* they are invoked together as two divinities sharing the space inhabited by human beings. Hermes is present everywhere that contact is established with others, whether on the road, in public institutions, the town square, or the market, whereas Hestia waits for us -at homeø where the stranger cannot penetrate and where the universal gesture of æclosing the doorø assures the intimacy of the family.<sup>2</sup>

Hermes and Hestia unite as deities who are constellated during the process of transition, when we cross thresholds or begin to enter liminal states. Along with Hecate we recognise them as the gods of thresholds, crossroads and boundaries: Hermes marks the outer territory while Hestia surveys the internal ones. In the classical world sanctuaries devoted to Hermes or Hestia were rare since these were gods who were encountered on the threshold of change or on the critical precipice of transition. As gods of liminality they appear on the threshold of change: as shepherd of dreams Hermes hovers on the horizon of consciousness while Hestia is centred on the hearth, the gateway to the soul.

Liminality is the experience of transition between two fixed modes of being and is the disorientation felt when a threshold is traversed. Its root *limen*, is from the Latin, meaning doorway, threshold or even entrance, all symbolic of marking a boundary. When we cross a threshold, we enter a liminal space, a place between two worlds, a transitional zone between two fixed ways and orientations, or two fixed psychological structures and identifications. We are no longer fixed to a literal place or familiar mental images of others or ourselves; the ego has entered into a space it does not recognise and cannot control. Liminality is created during periods of psychological change and growth when the ego is unable to fully identify with a former self-image. The ego is then suspended between what is familiar and what is unknown, which creates confusion, disorientation and receptivity to subtler ways of being allowing the individual to perceive a different reality and to be open to the gods. For instance, loss of something familiar often plunges one into a liminal state and therefore a threshold crossing. The psychological landscape of loss feels barren and uninhabitable without the loved one or what is familiar. Liminality is experienced not only at the loss of a loved one but during important life transitions like adolescence, mid life and other nodal events in our lives, as well as pilgrimage.

And when we enter into liminality the god Hermes is evoked as a guide into the sphere of Hestia and the soul. We meet these gods through the shedding of the skin, identity changes and life cycle changes.

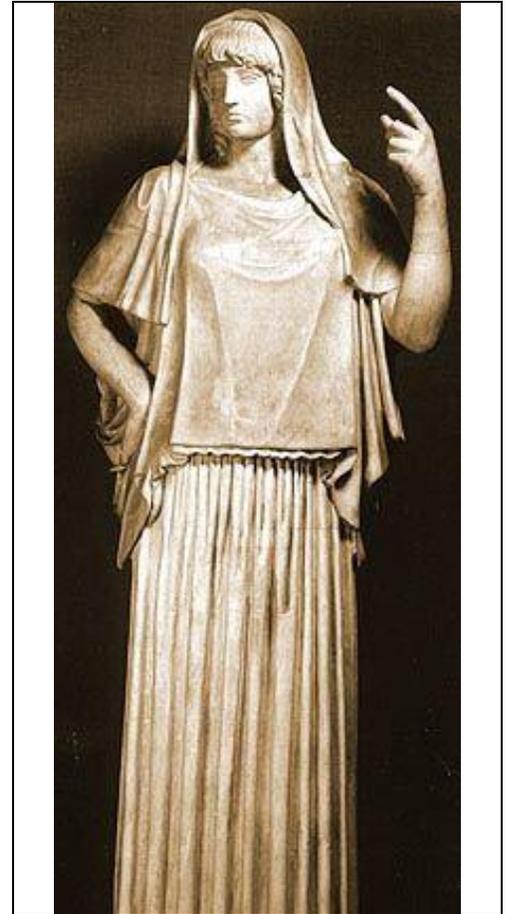
When crossing the threshold either Hermes or Hecate, protectors in this transitional zone, will be our guides. Whenever we enter into the world of Hermes we enter into a state of flux and change, transiting from one sphere to another. As the god of boundary and boundary crossing Hermes' role was also as the *psychopomp* who led the souls into the underworld and at times also escorted some out as the guide into the world beyond the boundary of our everyday. Hermes waits on this threshold between the conscious and the unknown. Hestia is the safe refuge of the interior world, that which never changes and is free from the violation of the outer world.

## HESTIA

*Seated or standing,  
she indicates no movement.  
Calm and dignity emanate from  
her.<sup>3</sup>*

- Ginette Paris

Roman copy of Greek original bronze (470 BCE);  
original in Villa Albani, Museo Torlonia, Rome  
but a plaster cast of the statue is in the  
Oxford Ashmolean Museum.



The first *Homeric Hymn to Hestia* depicts the goddess as having received the highest honour to have an eternal place in the house of the gods and acknowledges her role as the deity whom mankind graces when feasting and drinking. As *Hestia Tamia* she was the goddess whom we must acknowledge and make sacrifices to before we eat or drink. Even Zeus acknowledged Hestia as the first goddess and the one to whom appropriate sacrifices must be made before feasting. She embraces grace and as a goddess embodies its virtues. Along with Hermes the hymn acknowledges Hestia as the goddess of friendship, the divine host and the deity who inhabits the central core of home. She is the goddess of the hearth and around the central flame of the home the guests and the ghosts mingle. Hestia is the continuity of family life and the coherence it brings to our everyday experiences. In this way she is the goddess of hospitality offering hospice to those in need.

Hestia was the first-born child of Cronus and Rhea, the first devoured by Cronus and the last to be brought up from his belly. Therefore she represents the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega or the eternal cycle. Yet Hestia is not a part of the outer rim of the cycle but situated at its centre. Therefore Hestia is often personified as stillness, discretion, centering and immobility while being depicted as veiled and virginal. In antiquity her sanctuaries were places of refuge, asylum and political peace. Hestia is constant, focused and dislikes change. She is the hearth, a symbol for both the centre and the focus of the home as well as the metaphor for family life and the family circle. As custodian of the hearth she is the eternal firelight burning at the heart of life, the fireplace of the home, and the flame lit in the city's central precinct. Hestia is also central to psychic life representing the sacred centre and is the goddess who honours sacred space and protects sacred images. She is spatiality, conferring safe places to congregate, mediating soul by giving it a hallowed place to be acknowledged. Hestia is also hospitable, welcoming and guests past and present to gather around her hearth. As a virgin goddess Hestia is the custodian of soulful space personifying the stillness at the centre of our busy everyday lives.

Few myths remain of Hestia; she is rarely personified, no statues or temples remain, yet at times in the archaic period she was the most honoured goddess, worshipped at the centre of the city and the centre of the Greek household. By the classical period Hestia was not included as one of the twelve Olympians having been replaced by Dionysus. Hestia and her brother Hades are the only two siblings who remain detached from the Olympian family dramas and feuds. Unlike their brothers, Poseidon and Zeus, or their sisters, Hera and Demeter, they are not identified with their family of origin or their siblings. Their places are internal, interior and introverted. Few images or alters survive as reminders of their worship or importance in cult. There were virtually no temples erected to them and they were seldom represented in art, sculpture or vase painting. Neither were they parents to heroes like their siblings. As gods of place both Hestia and Hades have been re-placed and dis-placed which are potent clues as to what we may have culturally and psychologically done with these gods. In a modern context this place of Hestia, as a metaphor for the hearth of inner life, has become dis-placed, re-placed by the rush and busyness of the outer world.

As an image of centre, Hestia is not personified or remembered by statues or temples but manifests through the sense of centering. She is the central point, the meeting place, the fires of the home, the hearth, the Omphalos as the symbol for the centre of the Earth. In antiquity her sanctuaries were a sacred space, non-warring zones and places of political peace. Plato remarked that when the Gods warred, it was only Hestia who did not take part, characterising the goddess's propensity to non-involvement. In the earlier myths of Hestia she resisted the advances of both her brother Poseidon and her nephew Apollo and was honoured with remaining eternally virginal. For Hestia this equates with her ability to mediate soul. She is the aspect of self, which can never be violated or abused and always able to access the soul. Hestia is central to psychic life and modern expressions remind us when we have lost touch with Hestia: 'can't settle down', 'off centre', 'being off base' all remind us of being out of touch with the goddess. To identify Hestia it is important to remember these points:

- Lack of Embodiment

Hestia personifies the fire of the hearth, the sacred flame. Being more spirit she is seldom embodied. As she has 'no body' she is often invisible to the eye representing the sphere of the soul. As the hearth she is a guide to the inner life and the central image around which soulful images can constellate. Hestia's sanctuary is the home.

- Sacred Space

Hestia represents spatiality and the sense of place and belonging. Place becomes her body and she mediates soul by locating it as place. She represented sacred space, the meditative moment the soul of place and the feeling of home. Hestia is the inner instinct to honour soul

by giving it a sacred place, an altar, a quiet moment. She represents hospice and offers hospitality to the aspects of self that feel displaced and dislocated.

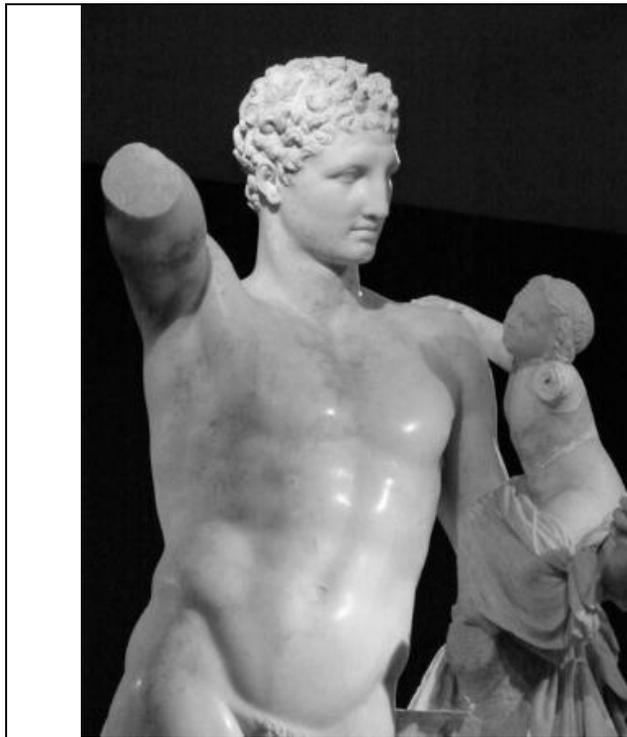
- Focus

The goddess is the hearth, the focal point of family life, which represents both the centre and the hub of the system. As the hearth light she offers stillness, quietude, meditation and solitude in the midst of the everyday.

- Hospitality

She welcomes both incarnate and discarnate guests around the hearth of her home. Guests and ghosts are both welcome in her sanctuary. Guest friendship was important to the Greeks and Hestia welcomes the traveler into her inner world.

In the Roman pantheon Hestia was Vesta and honoured as the goddess who tended the sacred flame as well as the Palladium, the secret objects brought from Troy which was connected to the preservation of the city. Priestesses of Vesta were known as the Vestal Virgins who served the goddess for a period of thirty years. While the position of a Vestal was one of great privilege and honours it also was one of great piety and responsibility. If a Vestal broke her vows of chastity and obedience the severe punishment was to be buried alive. Hence the archetype of Hestia changed from the Hellenic sense of sacred centre to the Roman idea of protecting the empire evolving from a sense of honouring internal space to the necessity to protect the outer place. By Roman times the idea of virginity has become literal in the Vestal Virgin, a tradition that was carried through to the Christian nun as the bride of Christ.



## HERMES

*He who moves  
about familiarly in  
this world-of-the-  
road has Hermes  
for his God.<sup>4</sup>*

-Carl Kerényi

Hermes holding the infant Dionysus is the ancient Greek sculpture by Praxiteles housed in the Archaeological Museum of Olympia; it was discovered in 1877 in the ruins of the Temple of Hera at Olympia.

Hermes is a complex god who became known as the messenger of the gods. He also shared this role with Iris, the goddess of the rainbow; however she would deliver only the message without alteration, whereas Hermes was often the negotiator or intermediary as well as the messenger. His other roles saw him as the patron of travellers and shepherds, the protector of the roads and those who travel down them. He was the god of *metis* (intelligence), which included cunning, trickery and deceit,

therefore he was the god of thieves and pickpockets and those who use cunning to survive. However if the thief was caught Hermes did not defend them, as they were no longer were using their wits. He was the trickster god who was skilled at sleight of hand, the god of commerce and trade as well as oratory. Hermes was also known as the leader of souls in his role as *psychopomp*. The word derives from *pempo* to send off, to guide and therefore the *psychopomp* is the guide to the psyche (soul) or the guide and leader of souls. In this role he was hypnagogic, able to induce sleep and drowsiness with his magic hypnotic wand. He was an early fertility god and the Romans took Hermes, along with his winged-sandals, traveller's cap and wand, to be their Mercury, messenger of the gods

As the god of the threshold and the patron of roads he was the guide through transitions and liminality. Therefore there are few temples to Hermes as he was the god in-between, the god whom the traveller met on the road, crossing the threshold or descending into the underworld. He was the god we recognised by the milestones, which marked our travels, or the herms that were boundary markers. In his role as *psychopomp* he was the leader of souls between two worlds or two ways of being. In becoming the messenger to Hades he also became the god who guided the soul across the boundary that separated life from death and the past from the future. He became the god of liminality and the one who appears at the threshold of transition. Hermes appears as a guide when the individual is in the space between the certainty of what has past and the void of what lies ahead. The God guides the soul in transition, whether it is the commercial traveller on the road, the initiate on the path of life or the voyager into the underworld. Honouring transitional space, marking boundaries and journeying are all part of Hermes's domain. As thief, trickster and boundary-crosser Hermes is aligned with the tradition of the shaman, another variant of the Magician. As a master of occult knowledge Hermes has guided the evolution of knowledge and wisdom from the magic-wielding seers through the wonder-working alchemists to the artificial intelligence used today to create magic. With knowledge we can inform ourselves, become more conscious of our goals and masterful with our creations, hence Hermes also became associated with intelligence and conscious intent.

From the moment of his birth Hermes had a mission to be acknowledged as an equal. As a later born son it was recognition from his brother Apollo that became important and the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* recounts the myth of the younger brother tricking his older brother into acknowledging him and his abilities.

## From Envy to Equality

Hermes was the son of Zeus and Maia, the eldest of the Pleiades, the seven daughters of Atlas and Pleione. The Pleiades were commonly known as the *ōweepersō* probably due to their perpetual state of grief over another sisterly constellation, the Hyades. One of the versions of their myth suggests that the seven sisters, the Hyades, were in such grief over the loss of their brother that they were transformed into the constellation of Hyades by Zeus. Then the other seven sisters, the Pleiades, were in such a state of grief over the loss of their seven half sisters that they committed suicide. Hence Hermes is born in a familial atmosphere where there is already a sibling undertow. And it is the baby god Hermes whose birth story is told in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* who right after his birth sets about to gain his niche and sense of equality, not with the great God Zeus, but with his half brother, Apollo.

Hermes's mother belonged to a sibling constellation where each one was part of a group, not necessarily an individual. The seven sisters were often referred to as an undifferentiated group of sisters named the Pleiades. Therefore it was already inherent in the family atmosphere that Hermes may compensate for this by fiercely pursuing his need to be differentiated from his elder half sibling, Apollo. His mother, Maia, was a recluse who kept to herself in a cave on Cyllene near her birthplace.

It was here that Zeus seduced her and where she gave birth to her son Hermes, who was determined to take his place on Olympus, a place his mother had not aspired towards. He will accomplish this through his cunning and trickery by stealing from his elder brother Apollo.

Hermes was the son of Zeus, the greatest god who was supreme ruler of the Olympian corporation. In order for Hermes to gain his position he saw his older brother, Apollo, as the obstacle. After detailing his ambition to his mother to become one of the immortals, his sibling rivalry towards his half-brother became evident:

As for honours,  
I'm going to get in on the same ones  
that are sacred to Apollo.  
And if my father won't stand for it,  
I'll still try,  
I'm capable certainly,  
to be thief number one<sup>5</sup>

At this point in the myth Hermes is not yet one day old and his intense competition with his brother is evident. This is a pattern that seems to be part of the sibling fate: to struggle for equality with and against the sibling. Sharing the same god as parent, Hermes sets about to win an equal place in the eyes of his father with his brother and his other Olympian sibs. Jean Shinoda Bolen recognises this in Hermes as an embodiment of the younger son:

Birth order can contribute to the development of the Hermes archetype. The god Hermes' relationship to his older brother Apollo is a key to understanding a competitive and acquisitive aspect of the archetype. Hermes arrives in the world acutely aware of his 'have-not' status and promptly steals from his older brother. In response to Hermes, Apollo was in turn victimised, angry, placated and charmed. Although both brothers eventually gain skills or power from the other through bartering, it is Hermes who began with nothing and acquired much.<sup>6</sup>

Hermes, the younger son, orients himself towards the sibling Apollo, not the father Zeus, in his quest for equality. It is by stealing the cattle sacred to Apollo that Hermes attempts to be noticed, envious perhaps of his brother's possessions and very aware of the possessions that are most important to his brother. The symbol of cattle is multi-dimensional; here it could represent the envy of another's valuables and the sibling experiences of ownership and sharing of resources. Another time it could represent the primal feelings underlying the relationship, or the fertility inherent in the relationship. For the sibling relationship is a fertile relationship where creativity is sown and harvested as well as a relationship that influences our values and self esteem. What are the cattle that Hermes feels compelled to steal?

Hermes' association with thievery and trickery are clearly illustrated in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* with the abduction of his brother's prize possessions. This behaviour is inherent in the sibling system, part of the Hermes/Mercury archetype that leads to experiencing lying, cheating, gossiping and teasing amongst the siblings. As Hermes suggests it is inherent in the process of differentiating and separating from the sibling. To chastise these expressions would contribute to impeding a natural evolution and growth of equality amongst the sibs. Zeus as the father is not involved at this stage and like many parents oblivious to the machinations that are being played out amongst their children. But as a father his justice, fairness and insight will be called upon to resolve the squabble.

After Hermes has safely absconded with his brother's herd of cattle and cleverly concealed them in a cave he took two of the cows and sacrificed them to the Gods.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly Hermes cut up twelve pieces to sacrifice to each god perhaps as a self-motivated ritual of entry into the family. Once again it was two of his brother's cattle that were sacrificed in his invocation to belong. The older sibling often feels they have sacrificed something of value for a younger sibling.

Hermes also wanted to make a place on Olympus for his mother Maia, who lived in exile from the gods. His mother knew the young child had been naughty and when he returned from his first day out she reprimanded him. Hermes, frustrated at his mother, answered:

We're not going to stick around here,  
as you want, the only two  
among all the immortal gods  
without any gifts,  
without even prayers!<sup>8</sup>

Apollo finds out that his cattle are missing and eventually tracks down Hermes. He is enraged at Hermes for the theft. Hermes, already a master thief, is now a master at lying using all the innocence that a baby can in declaring that he is completely free of guilt; how could he even begin to know what Apollo is talking about when he was just *born yesterday*. Hermes and Apollo suggest that sibling behaviour of name calling, lying, cheating, stealing, is all part of the equation of sibling survival.

And it is at this point that the parent must be called. Zeus is amused, for as the parent he knows the truth of the conflict. How could he not love the child-like impetuous Mercurial schemer, but Zeus must also be just. He gives his authority to the brothers to work this out themselves. He does not punish Hermes for his actions but lets him know that he does not buy the innocent act either. He demands Hermes return the cattle to his brother. Both, in this way, have been supported by the father.

While it appears Hermes must take from the elder to feel equal the story tells us that the younger Hermes also has a gift to give his brother. Before Hermes sets out to steal Apollo's cattle he encountered a turtle outside the front of the cave on the afternoon of his birth. Inspired by the fluorescent shell and the ideas that raced through his head he decided to fashion an instrument that would create a harmonious and beautiful sound. And so on the first day of his life, Hermes creates the lyre, which is the instrument his brother Apollo becomes associated with in myth. The bow, the lyre, the tripod are all emblematic of Apollo. And it is his younger thieving brother who supplies this part of his identity. Hermes shows Apollo where the cattle are. He has made his statement. The brothers now have the space to form a relationship. And it is here that Hermes gives Apollo the gift of the lyre, an integral part of his brother's identity. Apollo's heart was touched. But still suspicious of his young brother he extracts a promise from him to never steal his possessions again. Hermes promised this and Apollo then promised, "there would never be anyone else among the immortals that he would love more." Apollo makes a promise that will be hard to keep for he is bound to his twin sister Artemis in an indelible sibling bond. Perhaps it must be enough for the brothers to know of their mutual love, not that it be greater than or more than. We learn in the sibling system that love is not exclusive.

Jenny Strauss Clay argues that Hermes's inability to equal Apollo is "Olympianism" - the hierarchical structure that exists amongst the Olympian gods placing Apollo's rank before Hermes as Zeus precedes Apollo, clearly dividing the power structure on Olympus.<sup>9</sup> The power structure of father to his two sons is very different to the power structure between the two brothers. The child-parent structure inherently implies a power imbalance. Zeus will always remain more powerful than his two sons. But on the sibling level we move to sharing power and resource. This is one of the initiations

of the sibling system in that its members are called to belong in a communal way sharing the familial resources and power. While there is an implicit power imbalance within the sibling system due to age, physical size, intelligence, parental influence etc. the system implies that the relationship moves through its conflicts, confrontations and rivalries to a position of cooperation, exchange and fraternal love. The sibling system is where this movement between conflict and cooperation, rivalry and love, inequality and equality can first take place. The sibling system is a microcosm of social structures in the world and it is here we learn how to find an equal place for ourselves in the world. Hermes, while he always will be in second position to his elder brother, nonetheless finds his a place of equality. He is different from his brother but equal to him.

Hermes also receives gifts in the poem. One of the roles he is assigned is as the only recognised messenger to the realm of Hades, his role as *psychopomp*. From the hour of his birth, Hermes crosses sacred boundaries so it seems appropriate that Zeus, near the end of the poem, bestows this role on Hermes. Here Hermes is named as the god who has access to both worlds. In becoming the messenger to Hades he also becomes the god who guides the soul across the boundary separating life from death. He becomes the god of liminal space.

It's for the glorious Hermes  
to rule, and to be  
the only recognised messenger  
to Hades, who himself  
never takes a gift from anybody.  
This time, though, he will give him  
a gift that is far from least.

Hermes as guardian of the sibling sphere also brings the role of psychopomp to this realm. It is the sibling who often is the guide of souls in our early years. Older sibs help the younger across important thresholds. Younger sibs are influenced by the way the older sibs have crossed the thresholds of change in their lives. In our younger years it is our sibs who are witness to the rapid developments in our lives. Sibs will often be among the first witnesses of important rites of passage in our childhood. Later in our lives as the psychopomp appears on the limen of change, the sibling pattern is often constellated. Hermes as the sibling psychopomp guides us across important thresholds and stages of development, leading us into unknown territory and bringing to consciousness aspects of self we may not have discovered ourselves. We vicariously witness our siblings explore the unknown with fascination and intrigue. It is their journeys into the unknown that either inspire us to follow them or choose an alternate path.

Hermes is the younger son in this sibling relationship, a position his father also was familiar with. The parent may instinctively be more comfortable or more sympathetic to the child that repeats his or her own birth position. The parent who is the youngest child themselves has an affinity with their youngest child due to identification through similar birth positions.

Apollo and Hermes are the archetypal story of brotherly rivalry transmuted into fraternal love. While they both are sons of a powerful father he assigns them enough autonomy to address each other as equals. Zeus creates the atmosphere for the potential rivals to become equals. They commence their relationship together with competition, rivalry, theft, rage and lies but end up in an exchange of valuable aspects of themselves. Each adds to the other. While they are often seen as gods of the left hemisphere of the brain they also share shamanistic roles. Hermes is the boundary crosser and the guide of souls into the underworld. Apollo presides over the arenas of divination and healing. Together they share a similar direction in life orientated towards the order of life that was so important to their father. They are now equals and custodians of their own private realms. Envy and

jealousy have found their shadow sides through their fraternal relationship- power and love. Hermes has found his place amongst the Olympians but also has become recognised as the leader of souls and guide into the underworld.

## Hermes as Guide and Leader of Souls

The classical motif of the hero's descent into the underworld or *catabasis* has been used in psychoanalytic writings as a metaphor for a descent into unconscious terrain; that which is dark, unknown and contrary to the Olympian ideals of the ego. The underworld sphere is unlike anything the hero has known to date- the values, customs and laws of this domain are alien. The encounter with the underworld terrain is a rich metaphor for passages in a life when the psychological landscape shifts and becomes unfamiliar. These passages in one's life are evoked out of a sense of loss, grief or an encounter with death. The space that separates the two spheres between what has been known, but now lost, and what is unknown but looming ahead is a liminal or suspended state. What the hero has previously known is now suspended; old forms of familiarity are not available. The hero, symbolic of the conscious knowing of self and mastery of the world that encompassed him, now faces a descent into an alien realm that is dark, foreign and dangerous.

The threshold between these two worlds (between what is known, light and conscious and what is unknown, dark and unconscious) requires guidance and direction. Once the threshold has been crossed into the unknown, the hero cannot be in control of this world through his strength; his identity now is suspended and the fixed mental images that once bound him to the world are in flux. There are no firm boundaries in this state of transition between the upper and lower worlds. The hero has now entered a state of liminality. The guide therefore needs special skills to navigate the unfamiliar terrain. Since the navigation during this liminal state is beyond the conscious faculties, all successful journeyers require a guide familiar with this liminal process to facilitate the transition in and out of the underworld. This is Hermes's forte.

Honouring transitional space, marking boundaries<sup>10</sup> and journeying are all part of the Olympian god, Hermes's domain. Hermes is a multi dimensional god. He is both the shepherd and guardian of flocks while also being a messenger to the gods; his associations range from images of the trickster god through to the *psychopomp*.

In the closing of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, Apollo himself had to set boundaries with his younger half-brother by refusing to share his role as the god of divination with Hermes. This was Apollo's domain, not Hermes's. However we could also suggest Apollo's connection to divination and healing as well as Hermes as the underworld traveller could represent more mystical aspects of their nature. Apollo as the god of prophecy, healing and divination is a god who may have been aligned with the northern traditions of Shamanism.<sup>11</sup> In the hymn Hermes is now a boundary crosser (like a shaman) and as we will see guides and retrieves the souls to and from the underworld. As thief, trickster and boundary crosser he also aligns himself with the role of a shaman. In the poem he is credited as the original designer of the lyre, Apollo's instrument, which links him into the tradition of music, also important to the shaman. Perhaps some of the mystical traditions of shamanic soul retrieval may be entering the conservative Homeric poem, albeit unconsciously.

Hermes and Apollo are both aligned with mystical traditions. Perhaps both Apollo and Hermes are too easily relegated to the rational side of the Olympian pantheon. Hermes as *psychopomp* brings a more instinctive way of knowing to the soul in transition. In the role of *psychopomp* Hermes guides both disembodied souls and incarnate heroes into the underworld. The hero Herakles's last labour required him to enter the underworld and bring back the monstrous dog Cerberus. This was the dog that ferociously guarded the threshold entrance to Hades and Herakles's task was to bring the dog back

to the upper world. He was to accomplish this feat without weapons. For the descent and ascent Hermes aided Herakles. Herakles tells Odysseus he could have not done this labour without Hermes.<sup>12</sup> Here Hermes acts as a companion-guide on the road to overcoming death. He is able to pass through the boundary separating life and death and aids the hero to return to the realm of consciousness out of the sphere of death.

So then it is appropriate that Orestes, who has lost his father Agamemnon, appeals to Hermes for help. In his anguish Orestes seeks consolation for the murder of his father. It is Hermes, he knows, who can be his guide:

Hermes, Guide of dead men's souls below the earth,  
Son of Zeus the Deliverer, fill your father's office:  
Be my deliverer. Receive my prayer; fight in my cause<sup>13</sup>

Homer cleverly illustrates Hermes's role as the guide over the threshold and through liminality in the last books of his epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Troy had lost her hero, Hector, in the war. With this great loss, the city was thrown into grief; there were no longer any fixed reference points. Troy was in a state of flux, of liminality. It was evident that a dramatic change was imminent; nothing could remain as it was. Priam, Troy's patriarch and Hector's father, embarks on a journey from the citadel of Troy into the dangerous and foreign encampment of the Greeks in order to plead for the return of Hector's body from Achilles. Troy must bury their dead hero so the transition of both Hector's soul as well as the city can be successfully accomplished. While Homer in Book 24 of *The Iliad* does not describe a literal underworld journey, the descent by Priam crosses the threshold of certainty into the dangerous unknown. The symbolism used to describe the mission is synonymous with the imagery of an underworld journey to Hades.

Since an important threshold is to be crossed, it is Hermes whom Zeus sends to guide Priam even though Hermes's loyalty in the war is with the Greeks. As guide on this journey Hermes is the companion needed to cross the boundary between what is known and what is foreign. He is the dearest to be man's companion and while Hermes is the guide, Priam's safety is assured. The god is clearly depicted as joining Priam on the edge of liminality in order to safeguard his passage. This is the darkness, the metaphor for crossing into the territory that is not known, uncertain, and foreign - Hades's realm of death. On the threshold of darkness Hermes waits.

Darkness is an image of approaching the threshold, crossing the limen into the unknown. Homer describes Hermes's rendezvous with Priam on the edge of darkness, sunset, and later we shall see Hermes leaving Priam at this same threshold, dawn, as the sun rises. Darkness is the domain of Hermes. The *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* suggests this:

And Hermes mingles now  
with all men and gods.  
And even though  
he helps a few people,  
he cheats an endless number  
of the race of mortal men  
in the darkness of night.<sup>14</sup>

Hermes escorts Priam through the dangerous passage, putting the sentries to sleep so Priam's presence goes unnoticed, then guides him through the first set of gates. Finally Hermes opens the huge gates that lead Priam into the sphere of Achilles. At this point Hermes reveals his true identity to Priam and leaves the old man to engage in negotiations with Achilles. Hermes is the guide in the

transition but once the destination is reached, he leaves. Liminality and transition are Hermes's sphere; once the goal has been reached, the hero is no longer in Hermes's realm.

We meet Hermes again when it is time to take Priam back to Troy. He wakes Priam and his herald and guides them safely to the crossing-place of the fair running river, of whirling Xanthos (24:692-3). The crossing-place of the river suggests the transition back to the world that is known. The poet also uses the symbol of the rising sun to mark the transitional point of the ascension.

there Hermes left them and went away to the height of Olympus  
and dawn, she of the yellow robe, scattered over all earth<sup>15</sup>

Hermes, as the one who crosses boundaries, also leads the disembodied souls into the realm of Hades as illustrated in Book 24 of *The Odyssey*. Hermes leads the procession of the suitors' souls, whom Odysseus has killed, into dim darkness of Hades:

í í .and Hermes  
the kindly healer led them along down mouldering pathways.  
They went along, and passed the Ocean stream, and the White Rock, and  
passed the gates of Helios the Sun, and the country  
of dreams, and presently arrived in the meadow of asphodel.  
This is the dwelling place of souls, images of dead men.<sup>16</sup>

Hermes is guide once again, this time to souls who are no longer incarnate. Again the symbols of the river and the gates are important. Hermes guides the disembodied souls into the land of shades where they encounter the heroes who fought in the Trojan War. One of the suitors, Amphimedon is recognised by his uncle, Agamemnon. Now that the souls have reached their underworld destination, Hermes disappears. He has successfully guided the murdered suitors to the realms of Death, their new level of experience. Their transition is completed.

But Hermes also retrieves those whose soul longs to emerge out of the underworld. It is Zeus who once again calls on Hermes in his role as courier to the underworld when Demeter demands the return of her daughter Persephone. It is Hermes who can lead Persephone out of the darkness of the nether region back up into the light of the gods. It is also Hermes who leads Pandora, whom he has just named and helped create, to Epimetheus. Pandora, as a newly created soul, is led by the divine guide/messenger to her fate. Here Hermes mediates a cataclysmic transition, a transitional experience that has repercussions for many.

Hermes meets us at the thresholds of death and again at the ascending gate. He waits at the gates, on the edge of darkness. The threshold may be a crucial juncture in a life or an initiatory phase like mid-life. The psychological encounter with death at mid-life brings the individual to the threshold where one encounters Hermes:

..the psychological change that unfolds at midlife, and the element that most  
unmistakably declares its uniqueness and brings it to its deepest meaning, is the  
lucid realisation of death as life's personal, fated conclusion.<sup>17</sup>

Or the threshold may be encountered in the darkness of sleep where Hermes is now the shepherd of dreams. Or the threshold is reached when the pain of loss and grief weighs down the ego defenses to the point where they disappear beneath the horizon of consciousness and the individual psychologically enters into liminality. These are some of many varied underworld experiences that constellate Hermes.

Hermes was not the only God to cross the boundary to the underworld.<sup>18</sup> But as we saw it is Zeus, the prime authority, who promotes Hermes to this role. He is the mediator<sup>19</sup> and conveyor of the soul in

transition. Why Hermes? Emily Vermeule in speaking of Hermes in his role as *psychopomp* says that the god was not accidentally made the wittiest of the Hellenic gods.<sup>20</sup> Hermes' wit and dexterity may be the internal light that helps guide the souls into the underworld. His intelligence helps the soul be reflective enough to contemplate death or perhaps to try to figure methods to control it. Hermes facilitates what the hero cannot. In a psychological sense the classical Hermes may be an innate intelligence that operates at transitional points in our lives. For as Vermeule suggests strong emotions, like Sarpedon's anger, cannot resist death and even Herakles' strength is of no avail facing death. He needs the intelligence for which he was not renowned which Hermes as guide facilitates. Memory, as part of Hermes' intelligence, also helps the transition. Remembering allows continuity to the process of life and ensures that something lives on after death.

Greek suggestions that intelligence was the only effective defence against death were literally true.<sup>21</sup>

Hermes' quickness and cunning is an integral part of the process of descent and entry into the sphere of the underworld and Death. It is perhaps the internal Hermes, a symbolic god, who first recognises the liminal symbols in our lives then guides us safely through the transitional passage as he did with Priam. Hermes' multifaceted selves -the trickster, the thief, the charmer, the guide, the healer, perhaps are all part of an innate ability to cross the threshold into the underworld.

## A Multi-Faceted God: Messenger, Magician, Mediator

As we have read Hermes has many faces. Wearing his *petasus*, the traveller's hat, with his *caduceus*, his herald's wand, as well as sandals and wings we know him as the messenger god. He arrives on Calypso's island in order to tell her that Odysseus must leave the island and continue on his journey home. He appeared to Odysseus to instruct him how to approach Circe. And he takes the message to Hades that Persephone must be released from the underworld. As magician Hermes prescribes the herb that restores Odysseus' men who had been turned into pigs by Circe. As mediator Hermes negotiates the release of Persephone so that her soul is able to return to the above world and be reunited with her mother. Hermes is also the god that accompanies the three goddesses, Hera, Aphrodite and Athena to Mount Ida in order to be judged by Paris.

Hermes is a youthful god in his roles as the patron of youth in their later adolescence and a god of the gymnasium. As guide and god of the threshold he is the representative of the transitions between what is conscious and unconscious. In another aspect Hermes is also a god of fertility and boundary. Boundary markers known as herms were square pillars with the head of Hermes on top and male genitals on the block base, which marked out sacred areas, precincts and crossroads. Alongside the road Hermes was remembered through heaps of stones, which marked the milestones of the journey. Hermes is the god of boundary and the deity who presides over crossing boundaries. Another role of Hermes was as the god of the marketplace, commerce and bargaining. Today we know Hermes as the volatile fluctuation in the stock market, rapid movements in stock prices or economic changes.

Hermes' epithets included Hermes *Cyllenian* referring to his birthplace, Cyllene. As *Epimelius* he was the keeper of flocks, the shepherd; *Dolius* referred to his craftiness while *Argeiphontes* was the name given to him as the slayer of the monster, the 100-eyed Argus. Hermes was perhaps the busiest of all the gods and one whom we are destined to meet when we reach a crossroads in our lives or embark on a new journey or course. When we are ready to make the transition Hermes waits for us on the threshold to guide through to the next stage.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> ÷The Hymn to Hestiaøfrom *The Homeric Hymns*, translated by Charles Boer. This describes both Hermes and Hestia.

<sup>2</sup> Ginette Paris, *Pagan Meditations*, translated by Gwendolyn Moore, Spring (Dallas, TX: 1986), 181.

<sup>3</sup> Ginette Paris, *Pagan Meditations*, 167.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Kerényi, *Hermes Guide of Souls*.

<sup>5</sup> ÷The Homeric Hymn to Hermesö from *The Homeric Hymns*, translated by Charles Boer, Spring, Dallas, 1970.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Shinoda Bolen. *Gods in Everyman, A New Psychology of Men's Lives and Loves*, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1989.

<sup>7</sup> This part of *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes* suggests that it was Hermes who first invented fire, an interesting thought for the God who will develop into the God of the alchemical process. The poem from the translation by Charles Boer says:

÷it was Hermes who was the first to come up with fire, and the way to make itø  
For an insightful and thorough diachronic study of Mercury see Freda Edis, *The God Between*, Arkana, London, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> ÷The Homeric Hymn to Hermesö from *The Homeric Hymns*, translated by Charles Boer.

<sup>9</sup> Jenny Strauss Clay. *The Politics of Olympus, Form and Meaning in the Major Homeric Hymns*, Princeton University (Princeton, NJ: 1989). 150.

<sup>10</sup> Marking boundaries was literally enacted through the placing of a ÷hermø(a stone pillar centred with an erect phallus and having the head of Hermes on top) at important transitional points, crossroads or property boundaries- see Morford and Lenardon, *Classical Mythology, Fifth Edition*, 213-4.

<sup>11</sup> For amplification on this point see E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and The Irrational*, Chapter 5: The Greek Shamans and the Origin of Puritanism. Dodds traces the influence of northern shamanism on the Greek notions of *psyche* with references to the Hyperborean (northern) Apollo as influenced by this tradition.

<sup>12</sup> In *The Odyssey of Homer*, Book 11:625-6, Heracles in the underworld tells Odysseus: ÷but I brought the dog up and led him from the realm of Hades and Hermes saw me on my wayö.

<sup>13</sup> Aeschylus, *The Oresteian Trilogy*, translated by Philip Vellacott, Penguin (London, 1959).

<sup>14</sup> *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, translated by Charles Boer.

<sup>15</sup> *The Iliad of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, 24: 694-5

<sup>16</sup> *The Odyssey of Homer*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, 24: 1-14.

<sup>17</sup> Murray Stein, *In Midlife*, Spring Publications (Dallas, TX: 1983). 108

<sup>18</sup> Asclepius raised a mortal from the dead hence lead the soul out of the underworld. Iris was also appointed as a messenger of the Gods and was able to occasionally cross the boundary to the other world. Hecate, while resident in the underworld, was also known as the guardian of the crossroads. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* she is instrumental in aiding Demeter to trace the whereabouts of Persephone: in some ways she too

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guards the process of liminality. Sarah Iles Johnston in *Hecate Soteira; A Study of Hekate's Roles in the Chaldean Oracles and Related Literature* draws an interesting parallel between Hermes and Hecate:

This is not to argue that Hekate never served the role that Hermes did at liminal points- protecting what was within a boundary from that which was without. The two functions could co-exist. Conversely, Hermes connection with liminal points, like Hekatesø could include protecting during transitions; he was, after all, a travellerø god and a messenger god. As Psychopompos, he aided men in crossing the boundary between life and death.

<sup>19</sup> as between Odysseus and Circe in *The Odyssey*

<sup>20</sup> Emily Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, University of California (Berkeley, CA: 1979). 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 27.