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Apatê and Hermes, Children of Night

In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, Apollo describes his half-brother as *melainêi nukti eoikôs* "like the black night" (358) and addresses him as *melainês nuktos hetaire* "the companion of black night" (290). Apollo rightly sees that beneath baby Hermes' innocent appearance lies something more sinister: although he was born at dawn (17), Hermes is a creature of the night. In this paper I argue that the *Hymn to Hermes* illustrates not just the god's well-documented association with Night herself (see e.g. Kerényi 1986: 44-52) but also his close relationship with Night's children, especially *Apatê* (Deception).

Other Homeric Hymns make reference to *nyx* and *apatê*, but the *Hymn to Hermes* focuses on nighttime and deception in a way the other hymns do not. In the preface of the poem, we learn of the clandestine, nocturnal affair of Zeus and Maia, conducted while Hera sleeps (4-9). Deceptive nighttime sex produces a child with affinities for both *nyx* and *apatê*, a child who is *hêgêtorî oneirôn*, "a conductor of dreams" (14) and *nuktos opôpêtêra*, "a spy of the night" (15). The central episode of the hymn also blends night and deception: under cover of darkness, Hermes steals the cattle of Apollo (18) and then attempts to deceive (*exapatan*, 318) his brother over the theft.

Night may be "either kindly protection or dangerous leading astray" (Otto 1954: 116) and she passes this ambivalence on to her offspring. In Hesiod's catalogue of the children of Night (*Theogony* 211-25), we see that the last few children -- *Apatê* (Deception), *Philotês* (Intimacy), *Geras* (Old Age), and *Eris* (Strife) -- all possess a certain duality. Hesiod himself explains in detail (*Works and Days* 11-26) that there are two kinds of *Eris*, a good kind and a bad kind. *Geras*, described as *oulomenon* "destructive" in Hesiod's catalogue (*Theogony* 225), is called *liparon* "sleek" in Homer (*Odyssey* 11.136 etc.), while *Philotês* brings pleasure but is so powerful that she may conquer even the king of the gods (*Iliad* 14.353).

I suggest that both *Apatê* and Hermes share in this duality. The term *apatê*, like English "deception," can refer both to the act of deceiving and the state of being deceived. More importantly, *apatê* is beneficial for the deceiver but often harmful for the deceived (Pratt 1993: 56-7). Hermes, too, exhibits a similar ambivalence. As an Olympian, he is one of the *dôtêres eaôn*, "givers of good things" (*Odyssey* 8.325), especially lucky finds; but as a thief, Hermes is equally adept at taking things away. And so Hermes is associated with *Nyx* and *Apatê* on two levels. First, there is the simple fact, amply illustrated by the *Hymn to Hermes*, that he operates after dark and employs deception. But more significantly, the god is, like Night and Deception, fundamentally ambiguous; he is "Hermés double-face, ami et tourment des hommes, généreux et avare de bienfaits" (Kahn 1978: 77). Though he has no genetic relationship to *Apatê*, the Hermes of the *Homeric Hymn* proves through his ambiguity and complexity that he, too, is a child of Night.