

Tortoises, lyres, *eros amêchanos*: the irresistible sex appeal of musical instruments
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The *Homeric hymn to Hermes*, the longest of the extant archaic hymns, provides us a very complex and important glimpse into the mythology, rituals, and even political economics, surrounding practices of music and song in the middle to late archaic period. It is our fullest surviving document that articulates the central role that music had in the cultural life of Greeks in the period before writing and literacy had spread very widely, transforming the basic processes of traditional orality and social performance. Like the other hymns, the *Hermes* hymn narrates a myth of origins. Its myth centers on the seven-stringed lyre that Hermes makes out of a tortoise's shell. In the narrative's fuller sweep, we get a very crafty foundation myth for the archaic *aoidos*, the oral singer, and his art of divinely inspired musical charm and persuasion.

Elsewhere I have explored at some length the step-by-step narrative emplotment of this text. The entire hymn is summed up, in a single early line: *entha chelun heurôn ektêsato murion olbon*, "finding a tortoise there he possessed endless bounty" (ln. 24). **[handout 2 (below)]** And Hermes' epiphany as the last-born Olympian god is announced in the next line, which both names him in the nominative for the first time, and explains the previous line: *Hermês toi prôtista chelun tektênat' aoidon*, "Hermes, you know, was the very first to make tortoise a singer" (ln. 25). All the critical terms for understanding the *Hermes* hymn are here: Hermes the god of chance, luck, discovery and opportunity; a turtle becoming a "singer" through a process of craft or *technê*; and establishing a relation

of production and exchange value between song, *oidê*, and wealth, bounty, or riches, *olbos*.

What does it mean exactly that Hermes found a tortoise, made her into a singer—the tortoise is emphatically feminine—and that thereby he possessed endless bounty? This is quite a feat really, a fantastic transformation and achievement. To understand it requires an exploration of the role *oidê* and its instruments played in archaic culture, and how this role was explained and interpreted through the meaningful narratives of myth.

Like the other long *Homeric hymns*, the song to Hermes relates words and deeds of gods, which are foundational words and deeds. They are first instances of events, establishing prototypes, authorizing ritual reproductions, initiating memorial festivities, of which the social engagements of religion are composed. The hymns also invest common everyday objects with religious and sacral associations. Through narrative, specific animals, plants, and cultural products are transformed into potent multivalent symbols. I use symbol here in Victor Turner's sense of a multivocal object that condenses many poles of reference, from physical to cosmic to normative, into a single "cognitive and affective field." Such symbols are the stuff of every religion, as Clifford Geertz argued long ago, sacred symbols being used to "synthesize a people's ethos...and their world view." Or as religious scholar Loyal Rue [in *Amythia*] has condensed the same point of view, Mythos mediates between Ethos and Cosmos: narrative processes of meaning-investment serve to link a culture's morality and behavioral norms (the ought) to reality as it is understood (the is). Other examples of such sacred symbols in the *Homeric hymns* is the *kykeon* drink, given by Metaneira to Demeter in the hymn to

Demeter; or the dolphin as a disguise for Apollo and thus a symbol for Apollo Delphinios in the hymn to Pythian Apollo. The tortoiseshell lyre too takes on the force of a potent sacred symbol, and the *hymn to Hermes* narrative serves to invest it with meanings that link its uses in social festival practices—Ethos here—to facets and forces in the world at large—or Cosmos—especially divine forces of *eros*, erotic desire, *mêtis* and *dolos*, craft and trickery, *hupnos*, sleep, and *euphrosune*, “conviviality” or “good cheer.”

As I’ve said, I’ve expanded on this elsewhere, especially the context of archaic musical culture. What I want to focus on specifically here is how the myth in the *Hymn to Hermes* ties in with the broader mythological cosmos, as narrated in other hymns and Hesiod, in order to present the tortoiseshell lyre as a divinely crafted musical instrument which possesses and transmits a virtually overwhelming musical force.

In the briefest of summaries, the myth goes like this. Hermes is born, finds a tortoise outside his mother’s cave, kills it and invents the tortoiseshell lyre. He sings a song of his own birth on it. Then by night he steals fifty of Apollo’s cattle, kills two of them, invents fire-sticks and institutes a twelve-part Olympian sacrifice. Apollo in anger hunts him down and drags him in before the tribunal of Zeus for theft. Hermes denies the charges, and Zeus laughs, then sends them off to retrieve the cattle. Finding two of the cattle killed, Apollo attempts to bind and punish Hermes, at which point Hermes pulls out his lyre, sings a beautiful theogonic song which disarms Apollo. Apollo decides to settle with Hermes, and asks to exchange the lyre. Hermes obliges, teaches Apollo the art of lyresong and gives him the lyre. In exchange, Hermes becomes the herdsman and the sworn friend of his older brother. That’s the gist of it, as a reminder.

This story of sibling rivalry, theft, exchange and reconciliation is a crucial culmination of the much longer narrative of the Olympian theology, that cosmogonic tale beginning in *Chaos*, from which arose *Erebos* and *Nux*—incarnations of darkness and obscurity—in the dark chthonian powers of *Gaia* and her offspring-lover *Ouranos* the most ancient heaven, and in *Eros*, the irresistible primordial force of attraction and sex. All these primal forces together generate a whole host of divine beings, leading to strife, feuds, conflicts, and disorder. In a third generation of conflicts and strife, Zeus attains supreme control as the king and father of gods and mortals. But to retain that supremacy he has to control and balance all the forces, all the sources of power, in the universe.

The Hesiodic narrative establishes by constant repetition that the chief forces in the universe are 1) Eros or erotic desire and sexual reproduction, 2) Bia and Kratos or violence and force, and 3) Techne, Dolos, and Metis, or craft, trickery and cunning. While sexual generation entails gender issues, and works to bring into existence new characters on the universal stage, the latter two powers—force and trickery—are in constant contention, being manipulated and applied by the competing divine beings to achieve their ends. And Zeus is successful where his forebears *Ouranos* and *Kronos* were not, because he is able to take control of both force and craft, both violence and trickery, both naked shows of strength and cunning guile and deception.

At the beginning of the *hymn to Hermes*, we learn that by fathering *Hermes* Zeus is accomplishing an intentional plan (*noos exeteleito*, ln. 10), and that this plan involves an erotic liaison with the dark older forces of the vanquished Titans. [see **handout 3**] The son of *Kronos* visits *Maia* in secret, for sexual encounters in her shadowed cave, at night, while sweet sleep (*glukus hupnos*) holds down *Hera*; and thus Zeus acts in secret from

gods and mortals (ll. 3-9). So Hermes is the love-child of a deceptive ruse in the dark of night. His mother's ancestry is important. [**handout 1**] Maia is one of the daughters of Atlas, brother of Prometheus and son of Iapetos, one of the older brothers of Kronos among the Titan children of Gaia and Ouranos. The children of Iapetos were those cousins who caused so many problems for the children of Kronos, especially the trickster Prometheus who stole fire for mortals; later, summoning up his maternal ancestry, Hermes' himself will "lay hold of the art of fire" (*puros d' epemaieto technen*, ln. 108), when he butchers and sacrifices two of Apollo's cows. Zeus' secret plan therefore appears to involve engaging this tricksterish but suppressed side of the Ouranian line to fulfill his new designs.

And so Hermes' nature, which aligns him with darkness, trickery, guile, and cleverness, is immediately apparent from his long and remarkable opening string of seven epithets: *paida polutropon, haimulomêtên, lêistêr', elatêra boôn, hegêtor' oneirôn, nuktos opôpêtêra, pulêdokon*, "a much-twisting child, cunning dissembler, thief, cattle driver, dream herder, night watchman, gatekeeper" (13-15). [**toward end of handout #3**]

How is this precocious arch-dissembler the fulfilment of "Zeus' mind"? The key lies in Hermes' chosen opponent, his older, stronger half-brother Apollo, who especially embodies those elemental forces of strength and force. He is *hekêbolos*, the far-shooter, whose arrows strike terror in mortals and gods alike. As the *Hymn to Delian Apollo* begins: "the gods tremble as he goes through the house of Zeus, and they all leap up from their seats at his approaching, when he stretches his gleaming bow" (1-2). [**handout 4**] With such a son Zeus may well have a reason to be insecure, and he needs to have a potent counterforce among his offspring powers. Hermes is such a child who will have

the gall to assault the farshooter in the dark of night, plundering from his herds of immortal cattle during those wee shadowy hours when the forces of *dolos* and *metis* are in ascendance.

When Hermes makes the lyre out of the tortoise that he finds, he summons up the primal forces of *techne* as well. Before he snatches up the tortoise, kills it, and quickly fashions the first lyre from its shell, he engages her in talk, at once seductive and negotiating. He laughs on seeing her, calls her an advantageous omen (*sumbolon*), says she has a “sexy body” (*phuên eroessa*), and calls her the “dance-tapping companion of the feast” (*choroitupe daitos hetairê*). [handout #5] The rest of his speech focuses on exchange values, of profits, advantage, and pricing. Then he weighs the choices: if the turtle lives it is a charm against binding-spells, precisely like those Apollo’s wields later on, I would argue, when in anger he binds Hermes’ with cords. But if the turtle dies, he says she will sing very beautifully. How this is of greater value to Hermes than charms against sorcery is left to be discovered as the narrative unfolds.

Hermes then takes the tortoise and “pierces out her life.” Out of her shell he fashions the lyre, described as his “sexy toy” (*erateinon athurma*). The first song he sings is of his own famous lineage and birth, how Maia and Zeus mingled in love. So Hermes’ first performance on the newly invented lyre very literally produces Hermes’ subjectivity in its first intentionally articulated and pronounced form. He sings his own ancestry, then goes on to sing about the possessions of his own house. At this point Hermes gets hungry for meat, lays the lyre down in his cradle as a placeholder of himself, and sets off on his arduous deception (*dolon aipun*, 66), like what thieves hunt for in the black of night.

Once Hermes accomplishes this theft—a long stretch of the narrative that I can’t delve into here—he sneaks back home, snuggles close with the lyre and feigns innocence. His mother scolds him, and threatens that Apollo will soon bind him in bonds (*desma*), but Hermes is bold and asserts that he will plunder Apollo’s shrine at Pytho. For he insists that he will gain *timê* equal to Apollo, or he will become the prince of thieves.

Apollo then hunts him down and hauls him in before Zeus’ tribunal, just as Hermes has planned. When he swears up and down that Apollo is wrong, Zeus laughs in recognition at his “evilminded son” (*kakomêdea paida*). He then sends the two off to find Apollo’s cattle. Then when Apollo sees the slaughtered cowhides that Hermes has laid out, he wonders out loud about Hermes’ strength (*to son kratos*, 407). Apollo is intent on binding him in bonds, but Hermes makes the bonds grow into the earth. Apollo is angered still more, but at this point [[despite some textual problems]] Hermes pulls out his secret weapon, the lyre. Hermes plays the lyre, and Apollo laughs in enjoyment (*gelasse gêthêsas*)—for the “sexy sound of the divine voice went through his breast and sweet desire seized his heart as he listened” (*eratê de dia phrenas êluth’ iôê / thespesiês enopês kai min glukus himeros hêirei / thumoi akouazonta* 420-23). [**handout #6**]. The lines are very clear in their implication, it is sweet desire that overcomes the angered force of Apollo, and its source is the sound of the lyre music entering his heart in sound through hearing. Hermes then sings an entire Hesiodic theogony, related in an abbreviated summary: and his song “authorizes” (*kraînôn*) the immortal gods, telling their births, portions, and ages; and as he listens to this Theogony, “helpless *eros* grips [Apollo’s] heart” (*eros...amechanos ainuto thumon*).

Held and bound by eros, Apollo offers to settle, to trade fifty cattle for the lyre, and on these terms to resolve their dispute peacefully. Of course, Hermes has already *stolen* fifty cattle, so such a “trade” and “settlement” is much to his advantage. In effect, for the bewitching power of the song and the music of the lyre, the theft is legitimized, and lyresong in fact becomes an exchange commodity. Apollo then seeks instruction in this new art (asking *tis technê, tis mousa*, what is this art, this muse?) and says that it brings three things at once: *euphrosune*, *eros*, and *hupnos*. [**handout #7**] Echoing this, when Hermes hands it over, giving him instructions on it, he tells him to take it free from care to the rich feast and the delightful dance and the fame-loving revel, as *euphrosunê* by night and day.

The lyre has become, through its maker Hermes, a vector and instrument through which those ancient cosmic forces, Eros and Hupnos—an ancient child of Nux (Night)—and Euphrosune, which in the Hesiodic account is one of the three Graces, daughters of Zeus and Eurynome, from whose eyes flowed *eros*. Both eros and hupnos had been emphasized in Hermes’ secretive begetting, in the cave of Maia, and now they emanate from his instrument to bring euphrosune, good cheer, to the feasts, dances, and revels of the gods. It is these forces of sexual attraction, sleep, and good cheer that hold the court of Zeus in order, as the often contentious gods feast, enjoy dance, song, drink, and the savor of sacrifices. And of course this image of festive social order on the divine plane is an idealized archetype for the preeminent *social values* of pleasant order and peaceful community on the human plane as well. And just as the Olympian feast is the prototype for human festival, so too the divine lyre and its performance art, Hermetic in origins but newly bought by Apollo, is replicated among mortals by human singers, the *aoidoi*.

Like Hermes of the hymn the archaic *aidos* exercised an “authorizing” power in singing the gods, their portions, their births and ages. He performed these origins to the delight of audiences in sacred contexts like Delphi, where the temple priesthods were the patrons and prize-givers. The *aidos*, like Hermes, could gain legitimately merely through song material goods which otherwise would be theft. And the key to this very remarkable power lay in the “sexy toy” that Hermes first invented, and which every *aidos* doubtless made, that turtle-turned-singer, the lyre.

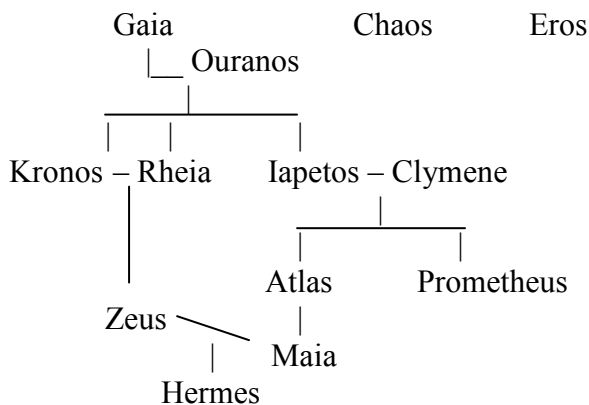
Thus the hymn does far more than narrate a fun and clever story. It roots the real and experiential power of the lyre and the performance of lyresong, to arouse desire, induce sleep, and bring good cheer, into a deeper cosmology and theology of divine figures and forces. By doing so the singers who composed and sang these hymns were in effect authorizing their own art, investing it with a clever explanatory and justificatory mythology. In this particular hymn they come very close, in fact, to giving away the entire game, and it may be aimed very specifically at insiders who understood the song-festival racket. Make a lyre, learn the songs, and how to sing well, they seem to say, and you can even convince the wealthy temple-dweller Apollo to hand you over his cattle. It’s a lucrative business in its own way; and after all, Zeus and all the gods do love their songs and dances most of all. With the lyre you hold power over the hearts and minds of humans and gods alike.

I have come to regard the *hymn to Hermes* as a very subtle and even devious text. It is slyly sarcastic and even possibly subversive about Apollo as a figure of upright and legitimate worldly and institutional authority. It accomplishes these sly critiques very literally through casting shadows, shades, and darkness on the bright light world of

Apollonian order and force. For to authorize a legitimate space for the newborn god Hermes the hymn champions theft, perfidy, perjury, deception, shady-dealing, self-aggrandizement, the sheer profit motive and opportunism, carnivorous hunger, shameless self-promotion, the arational seductive and persuasive powers of sweet words, songs, melodies, and the wheeling and dealing that turns ill-gotten gains into legitimate trade and exchange. In the end, we are left with a rather disturbing divine vision, of the new god Hermes who “indiscriminately deceives (*to akriton êperopeuei*) through the black night the tribes of mortal humans.” [handout #8] Opportunism incarnate, Hermes was a fairly realistic divinity. And the bewitching eroticism of music and song were tied, through their origins, to this midnight deceiver.

[HANDOUT]

1. Genealogy of Hermes



2. *h.Hermes* 24-25

ἔνθα χέλυν εὐρών ἐκτήσατο μυρίον ὄλβον·
Ἴερμῆς τοι πρῶτιστα χέλυν τεκτήνατ' ἀοιδόν

“There finding a tortoise he possessed immense bounty.
Hermes, you know, was very first to make tortoise a singer.”

3. *h. Hermes* 1-19

Ἴερμῆν ὕμνει Μοῦσα Διὸς καὶ Μαιάδος υἱόν, (1)
Κυλλήνης μεδέοντα καὶ Ἀρκαδίας πολυμήλου,
ἄγγελον ἀθανάτων ἐριούνιον, ὃν τέκε Μαῖα
νύμφη εὐπλόκαμος Διὸς ἐν φιλότῃτι μιγεῖσα
αἰδοίῃ· μακάρων δὲ θεῶν ἠλεύαθ' ὄμιλον (5)
ἄντρον ἔσω ναίουσα παλίσιον, ἔνθα Κρονίων
νύμφη εὐπλοκάμῳ μιγέσκετο νυκτὸς ἀμολγῶ,
ὄφρα κατὰ γλυκὺς ὕπνος ἔχοι λευκώλενον Ἥρην,
λήθων ἀθανάτους τε θεοὺς θνητοὺς τ' ἀνθρώπους.
ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ μέγαλοιο Διὸς νόος ἐξετελεῖτο, (10)
τῇ δ' ἤδη δέκατος μείς οὐρανῶ ἐστήρικτο,
εἷς τε φῶς ἄγαγεν, ἀρίσημά τε ἔργα τέτυκτο·
καὶ τότε ἔγεινατο παῖδα πολύτροπον, αἰμυλομήτην,
ληϊστῆρ', ἐλατῆρα βοῶν, ἡγήτορ' ὀνείρων,
νυκτὸς ὀπωπητῆρα, πυληδόκον, ὃς τάχ' ἔμελλεν (15)
ἀμφανέειν κλυτὰ ἔργα μετ' ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσιν.
ἦζος γεγονῶς μέσῳ ἤματι ἐγκιθάριζεν,
ἐσπέριος βοῦς κλέψεν ἐκηβόλου Ἀπόλλωνος,
τετράδι τῇ προτέρῃ τῇ μιν τέκε πότνια Μαῖα.

Sing a hymn of Hermes, Muse, Zeus' and Maia's son,
guardian of Kyllene and flock-rich Arcadia
lucky messenger of immortals, whom Maia bore
fine-braided nymph who mixed in love with Zeus,
modest, for she avoided gatherings of the happy gods
dwelling in a shadowy cave; there Kronos' son
mixed with the fine-braided nymph, at night's milk-hour,
while sweet sleep subdued white-armed Hera,
escaping notice of deathless gods and mortal humans.
But when indeed great Zeus' mind achieved its end
and the tenth month stood fixed in ancient heaven (*ouranos*)
into the light she (?) brought, and wrought noteworthy deeds:
and then she gave birth to a *polytropos* son, a shifty-minded
thief, cattle driver, dream herder, night watchman, gatekeeper
who quickly would reveal famous deeds among immortal gods.
Born at dawn, at midday he played the kithara
at evening he stole the cattle of far-shooting Apollo
on that fourth day [of the month] when queen Maia bore him.

4. *h. Apollo* 1-4

μνήσομαι οὐδὲ λάθωμαι Ἀπόλλωνος ἐκάτοιο,
ὄντε θεοὶ κατὰ δῶμα Διὸς τρομέουσιν ἰόντα:
καὶ ῥά τ' ἀναΐσσουσιν ἐπὶ σχεδὸν ἐρχομένοιο
πάντες ἄφ' ἐδράων, ὅτε φαίδιμα τόξα τιταίνει

I'll recall and not forget Apollo far-shooter,
at whom the gods tremble as he goes through Zeus' house
and they leap up as he approaches near
all of them from their seats, when he draws his shining bow.

5. *h. Hermes* 29-39

Διὸς δ' ἐριούνιος υἱὸς
ἀθρήσας ἐγέλασσε καὶ αὐτίκα μῦθον ἔειπε:
“σύμβολον ἤδη μοι μέγ' ὀνήσιμον: οὐκ ὀνοτάζω.
χαῖρε, φυὴν ἐρόεσσα, χοροϊτύπε, δαιτὸς ἐταίρη,
ἀσπασίη προφανεῖσα: πόθεν τόδε καλὸν ἄθυρμα
αἰόλον ὄστρακον ἔσσο χέλυς ὄρεσι ζώουσα;
ἀλλ' οἴσω σ' ἐς δῶμα λαβῶν: ὄφελός τι μοι ἔσση, (35)
οὐδ' ἀποτιμήσω: σὺ δέ με πρῶτιστον ὀνήσεις
οἴκοι βέλτερον εἶναι, ἐπεὶ βλαβερὸν τὸ θύρηφιν:
ἧ γὰρ ἐπηλυσίης πολυπήμονος ἔσσεαι ἔχμα
ζώουσ': ἦν δὲ θάνης, τότε κεν μάλα καλὸν αἰείδοις.”

And Zeus' lucky son
looked and laughed and right then told a story:
“An omen already for me, great profit, I won't slight it.
Hi there, lovely creature, rhythm of dances, the feast's companion,
a truly happy epiphany! Where's it from, that fine toy
such a sparking shell on a turtle living in the mountains?
But I'll take you, carry you in the house, you'll be some use to me,
I won't misvalue you, and you will profit me first of all,
it's better in a house since out of doors is dangerous,
for against painful binding spells you might be a charm
while alive, but if you die then you might sing beautifully.”

6. *h. Hermes* 418-27

ῥεῖα μάλ' ἐπρήυνεν ἐκηβόλον, ὡς ἔθελ' αὐτός,
καὶ κρατερόν περ ἰόντα: λαβῶν δ' ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ χειρὸς
πλήκτρῳ ἐπειρήτιζε κατὰ μέρος: ἦ δ' ὑπὸ χειρὸς
σμερδαλέον κονάβησε: γέλασσε δὲ Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων

γηθήσας, ἐρατὴ δὲ διὰ φρένας ἤλυθ' ἰωὴ
 θεσπεσίης ἐνοπῆς καὶ μιν γλυκὺς ἴμερος ἦρει
 θυμῷ ἀκούζοντα: λύρη δ' ἐρατὸν κιθαρίζων
 στῆ ῥ' ὃ γε θαρσῆσας ἐπ' ἀριστερὰ Μαιάδος υἱὸς
 Φοίβου Ἀπόλλωνος: τάχα δὲ λιγέως κιθαρίζων
 γηρύετ' ἀμβολάδην -- ἐρατὴ δέ οἱ ἔσπετο φωνή -- κράινων
 ἀθανάτους τε θεοὺς καὶ γαῖαν ἐρεμνήν,
 ὡς τὰ πρῶτα γέγοντο καὶ ὡς λάχε μοῖραν ἕκαστος.

Very easily he soothed the far-shooter, as he himself wished,
 even though he was stronger. Taking it on his left hand
 he tried it with a plectrum by turns, and under his hand
 it sounded awesome, and Phoebus Apollo laughed
 delighted, and a sexy sound went through his breast
 from the divine voice and sweet desire seized him
 in the heart as he listened; playing erotically on the lyre
 that son of Maia stood there with courage on the left side
 of Phoebus Apollo; swift and clear playing the lyre
 he sang out a prelude—and sexy the voice followed—authorizing
 the immortal gods and the dark earth
 how they first were born and how each received its portion.

7. *h. Hermes* 447-49

(Apollo:)

τίς τέχνη, τίς μουσα ἀμηχανέων μελεδώνων,
 τίς τρίβος; ἀτρεκέως γὰρ ἅμα τρία πάντα πάρεστιν,
εὐφροσύνην καὶ ἔρωτα καὶ ἦδυμον ὕπνον ἐλέσθαι.

What art? what Muse for helpless sufferings?
 What pathway? For truly three things all at once are in it:
 one gets good cheer and desire and sweet sleep.

8. *h. Hermes* 574-78

οὕτω Μαιάδος υἱὸν ἄναξ ἐφίλησεν Ἀπόλλων
 παντοίῃ φιλότητι: χάριν δ' ἐπέθηκε Κρονίων.
 πᾶσι δ' ὃ γε θνητοῖσι καὶ ἀθανάτοισιν ὁμιλεῖ.
 παῦρα μὲν οὖν ὀνίνησι, τὸ δ' ἄκριτον ἠπεροπεύει
 νύκτα δι' ὀρφναίην φῦλα θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων.

So the lord Apollo loved the son of Maia
 with every sort of friendship. And Kronos' son gave him favor.
 And that one associates with all mortals and immortals.
 He may only profit a little, but indiscriminately he deceives
 through the black night the tribes of mortal humans.