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The Mercurial Nowhere:

Intervention and Lies in Receptions of Hermes/Mercury

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

by

Shane Black

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Mercurial Nowhere:

Intervention and Lies in Receptions of Hermes/Mercury

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Shane Black

Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Zrinka Stahuljak, Chair

My dissertation considers the messenger of Greco-Roman epic and its evolution from Homer to Dante. At issue is how the epic mode makes sense of the tension between authority, as mandated by the cosmological hegemon Zeus/Jupiter, and the presentation or delivery of that authority by Hermes/Mercury, the god of lies. Considering the chain of reception of the epic herald reveals that epic space is queer space, comprised of infinite possibilities and outcomes that are determined in real time by the intervention of the Mercurial figure, whose oscillation between the dutiful herald and the deceitful trickster represents the tension between closure and catastrophe in the epic mode.

I argue that the unique confluence of the Mercurial figure's functions in *Aeneid* 4 results in the creation of a narratologically liminal zone called the *nusquam* ("nowhere"), which operates as a kind of paratext alongside the text. Within the locus of the *nusquam*, the

authoritative lies of the Mercurial figure govern the competing narrative strategies that collide in a time and place outside the diegetic bounds of the epic poem.

The staging of space and language in the Mercurial figure's *nusquam* reveals that the epic mode is less dependent upon the distant past than it has been considered historically, and therefore, less orientated towards the reclamation of mythical values, but towards the infinite malleability of space/time. Consequently, an analysis of the epic herald demonstrates that a fundamental characteristic of the epic genre is that its authority is rooted to alterity. The Mercurial is that which makes alterity not only possible, but essential to the formulation of the epic diegesis; it mobilizes the quiet/unspoken/tacit counter narratives that run alongside the primary diegesis. My analysis reveals that power derives from the fragmentation of the epic narrative and that trespassers and interlocutors who do not adhere to historical or literary tradition are ultimately responsible for the direction of the epic narrative.

The dissertation of Shane Black is approved.

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Dedicated to Walter Desmond and Lee Tempest

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Anything of value within this dissertation is a crude and coincidental reflection of Melinda Stang's brilliance.

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INTRODUCTION

My dissertation considers the messenger of Greco-Roman epic and its evolution from Homer to Dante. At issue is how the epic mode makes sense of the tension between authority, as mandated by the cosmological hegemon Zeus/Jupiter, and the presentation or delivery of that authority by Hermes/Mercury, the god of lies. Considering the chain of reception of the epic herald reveals that epic space is queer space, comprised of infinite possibilities and outcomes that are determined in real time by the intervention of the Mercurial figure, whose oscillation between the dutiful herald and the deceitful trickster represents the tension between closure and catastrophe in the epic mode.

I argue that the unique confluence of the Mercurial figure's functions in *Aeneid* 4 results in the creation of a narratologically liminal zone called the *nusquam* ("nowhere"), which operates as a kind of paratext alongside the text. The special conditions of the *nusquam* make it distinct from the primary narrative of the epic and, as such, it represents a threshold not unlike a preface or an illustration that accompanies a literary work according to Gérard Genette's narratological classification.[1] Within the locus of the *nusquam*, the authoritative lies of the Mercurial figure govern the competing narrative strategies that collide in a time and place outside the diegetic bounds of the epic poem. As the conductor of the epic diegesis, whose primary function is to rescue the poem from narrative stasis, Hermes/Mercury is often overlooked because he is situated in the margins of the epic narrative, making brief interventions before disappearing from the poem entirely. However, interstitial space, which Hermes/Mercury governs as the god of boundaries, has an outsized impact on the genre as a whole because this

[1] Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean, "Introduction to the Paratext," (*New Literary History* 22, no. 2 1991): 261.

space is the nexus of alternative readings and is responsible for the epic's rejection of closure and its endless iterability.

To make sense of the relationship between space and the lies of the Mercurial figure, I consider how the nowhere space of the *nusquam* represents a literary expression of the void according to Karen Barad's work on quantum physics. As Barad explains, a standard view of quantum physics is that the particles that make up the universe blink in and out of a void of empty space. However, it is increasingly clear that "this indeterminacy not only is responsible for the void not being nothing (while not being something) but may in fact be the source of all that is, a womb that births existence."[2] Building on the evocative image of a productive emptiness, I maintain that Mercury's intervention creates a void in the margins of the epic diegesis where literary convention cannot reach. In the *nusquam*, or dream space, Mercury carves out a space for alternative traditions where he is free to oscillate between trickster and herald simultaneously.

The staging of space and language in the Mercurial figure's *nusquam* reveals that the epic mode is less dependent upon the distant past than it has been considered historically, and therefore, less orientated towards the reclamation of mythical values, but towards the infinite malleability of space/time. Consequently, an analysis of the epic herald demonstrates that a fundamental characteristic of the epic genre is that its authority is rooted to alterity. The Mercurial is that which makes alterity not only possible, but essential to the formulation of the epic diegesis; it mobilizes the quiet/unspoken/tacit counter narratives that run alongside the primary diegesis. My analysis reveals that power derives from the fragmentation of the epic narrative and that trespassers and interlocutors who do not adhere to historical or literary tradition are ultimately responsible for the direction of the epic narrative. In my reading, the epic

[2] Karen Barad, "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21 (2015): 394.

messenger operates as an arbitrating force that facilitates alternative readings alongside of the primary diegesis so that no one reading of the epic dominates. The Mercurial figure, like the observer of a quantum field, only temporarily activates a reading by measuring the substance of the narrative moment to moment.

This dissertation challenges conventional allegorical readings of the epic herald that internalize the messenger's role or subsume it in service of psychological readings of intervention in favor of a reading of externalization that maps Mercurial speech onto epic space. Rather than attempt to subsume Mercury into a single, proscriptive reading of the epic mode, this dissertation argues that it is the Mercury's intrusion that fractures a single reading into a spectrum of multiple parallel readings. Classical epic, like the imagination of nature and the void, according to Karen Barad, has enjoyed an unwarranted reputation for being rigid, unidirectional, and fatalistic. And just as Barad reveals the instability that underpins long held scientific assumptions about natural processes, my dissertation complicates long standing assumptions about the complicity of the epic herald and the epic mode in the project of empire building by supplanting any one source of poetic authority in the text, such as Zeus/Jupiter or Apollo, with the god of lies. In fact, the Mercurial figure reveals that the epic genre is necessarily queer in that it defies binaries. Despite the epic narrative's insistence on the inevitability of fate, an analysis of the Mercurial figure reveals that there is no inevitable imperial conclusion to the epic form. Dido absolutely did not have to die in *Aeneid* 4, and Odysseus did not necessarily make it home to Ithaca, as *Inferno* 26 suggests, because the epic mode is not beholden to history when Mercury is the patron god of the epic form, and the Mercurial intervention is the source of its *auctoritas*.

In the endless debate about *Aeneid*'s political sympathies, which scholars continue to

relitigate after the Harvard School challenged the epic's relationship to the Roman imperial project in the 1960s, a reevaluation of the process by which the epic narrative establishes a relationship between authority and the transmission of that authority is crucial.[3] Adam Parry famously identified "two voices of the *Aeneid*," in the 1960s: One voice is "a public voice of triumph," which belongs to an Aeneas who is a man in an imperial world, "where the State is supreme."[4] The other is "a private voice of regret" reserved for Aeneas' personal feelings of loss that "is never allowed to motivate action."[5] Whether the *Aeneid* takes a sympathetic view to Augustus and the nascent Roman Empire or a pessimistic view that is critical of the Roman State in an individual scholar's work depends largely on which of those two voices rings truer to them. However, to this day, there is no consensus among scholars as to the *Aeneid*'s position on political power.[6] And while conservative attempts to reify a single Western canon hold up the Greco-Roman epic as an exceptional and foundational text, my dissertation demonstrates that any attempt to locate a single authoritative voice in the epic form overlooks the genre's Mercurial rejection of all binary thinking and complicates any one totalizing reading of the narrative. This dissertation does not privilege an optimistic or pessimistic reading of the *Aeneid* over the other but is invested in understanding how and why the epic mode allows for both

[3] Adam Parry outlines the debate between scholars who view the *Aeneid* as imperial propaganda and pro-Augustan and those who take a more pessimistic view and read the *Aeneid* as critical of Augustus and the nascent Roman Empire. See Adam Parry, "The Two Voices of Virgil's 'Aeneid,'" (*Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 2, no. 4 1963), 80. To this day, there is no consensus among scholars as to the *Aeneid*'s position on Augustus. For further information about how the debate from the 1960s continues to inform contemporary criticism, see Hans-Peter Stahl's book, *Pro-Augustan Study, Poetry Underpinning Power: Vergil's Aeneid: The Epic for Emperor Augustus* (2016).

[4] Parry 1963, 79.

[5] Parry 1963, 79.

[6] For further information about how the debate from the 1960s continues to inform contemporary criticism, see Hans-Peter Stahl's book, *Pro-Augustan Study, Poetry Underpinning Power: Vergil's Aeneid: The Epic for Emperor Augustus* (2016).

interpretations so readily and how that duality is fundamental to the reception of epic material.

Inspiration and Continuing Importance

The idea for this dissertation originates from the coincidental collision of Dante's *Inferno* and Vergil's *Aeneid* in my junior year of undergraduate studies. As I was struggling to read *Aeneid* 4 for my Latin epic seminar, I was reading *Inferno* 9 in a survey of Italian literature for a cultural studies course. It struck me that in both epics, a single enigmatic figure, with a flick of their magical stick, rescues the epic hero from the threat of narrative stasis. It was just as confounding as it was interesting to me that, after making such a consequential intervention, both heralds disappear from their respective texts. At the time, I became convinced that the heralds were of extreme importance to the larger themes of the texts, but I was unable to find scholarship that explored what was, to me, a clear relationship between the Roman and Italian epics. My first crude attempt at a long form academic paper with my undergraduate honor's thesis did not yield further clarity on the subject, though that project did inspire in me a desire to make sense of the inherent complication of Mercury's contradictory offices as the spokesperson for Jupiter and the god of lies. The scholarly impulse to read Mercury's improvisational speech as a playful manifestation of his trickster nature did not suffice to explain the striking confluence of his oppositional offices in *Aeneid* 4 when Aeneas' dream violently severs the hero from queen Dido and forever reshapes the course of Roman history.

In the intervening years, I have developed a sensitivity for tricksters and their brief, but meaningful, contributions, from Shakespeare's Ariel to Star Trek's Q, and how little attention they enjoy. This dissertation recuperates the herald by centering the trickster's speech and by reconsidering its role in the authorship of epic space, which has been a consistent fixture of

classical reception operating in plain sight, despite having gone mostly unexamined in the transmission, adaptation, and consideration of classical epic for centuries.

Since my junior year in 2011 when I first encountered the epic herald, I would occasionally wonder whether the exploration of that enigmatic figure would continue to be worth exploring. In the last ten years, as the state of national and international politics has shifted due to the resurgence of far-right movements, the COVID 19 crisis, and numerous armed conflicts, there were times when I considered abandoning my project in favor of something more immediately pressing to my lived reality. However, as I write this draft in the twilight hours of 2024, it is as clear to me now as it was in 2011 that the examination of Mercurial speech remains essential to understanding how classical narratives persist in the contemporary discourses of power. The following anecdotes from the last two years illustrate the reality of classical reception's continuing relationship to the malleability of space and the role of the language in the creation of that space in our current moment.

In the Summer of 2023, Classical Studies had a brief, if unflattering, moment in the sun when a viral internet meme about the Roman Empire became a flashpoint for political debates about white supremacy and gender in the United States.[7] Women all over the world posed a simple question to their male presenting partners: "How often do you think about the Roman empire?" Typically, to the questioner's amusement, the partner would admit to thinking about Rome frequently. This social media trend led to much speculation about the predominantly white subjects of the question and their investment in ancient Rome. Many editorial posts were quick to point out, "when it comes to the Roman Empire, there's a gender bias here, and also a racial

[7] For a brief summary of the meme and its origins, see Dani Di Placido, "TikTok's 'Roman Empire' Meme, Explained," (*Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 20 Feb. 2024).

one."[8] It is not difficult to understand how, given the political temperature in the 2020s, that there would be an uncomfortable correlation between white and male presenting subjects and the fantasy of an imperial and inaccessible past. Although the initial meme is well past its social media expiration date, its impact persists in that it has introduced a new idiom into the English language: "my Roman empire is _____."[9] An individual's "Roman empire" is something that they think about obsessively, but privately. In a single phrase, the expansiveness of the Roman empire collapses into an amorphous and individuated whimsy. Through language, the historic locus of Rome can mean anything in cyberspace in 2024.

At the same time that the uncomfortable relationship between masculinity and antiquity was being explored on Tik Tok, Marvel's Loki, the god of lies, became the living embodiment of serialized storytelling by weaving the infinite outcomes of time and space into a single location in the interstice of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).[10] In the series finale of Disney Plus's *Loki*, the universe begins to unravel as the branches of parallel universes explode uncontrollably. It is only after Loki, the Norse god of lies, wrangles the various branches into a tree, tethered to his own body, that the crisis is averted. Ironically, the technology that Disney uses to film its television programming is called "The Volume," which projects a virtual world onto a physical filming set. The technology allows for a quicker release schedule by using previsualized elements for its effects while also giving actors a better sense of immersion on a set that would

[8] David M. Perry, "Opinion: Men and the Roman Empire is More than a Meme," (*CNN*, 18 Sep. 2023).

[9] Though official English language authorities have been slow to acknowledge the idiom, online meme databases have logged the phrase "my roman empire" in multiple contexts. See https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/my-roman-empire and https://later.com/social-media-glossary/roman-empire/ for crowd sourced definitions.

[10] The recontextualization of Loki as the god of stories is based on Kieron Gillan's reinvention of the character from his run on the comics *Journey into Mystery* (2009) and *Loki: Agent of Asgard* (2014) from Marvel Comics.

otherwise be empty before final effects are added in post-production.[11] In essence, the Loki television show stages in its imagination of interstitial space between parallel universes the very method of Disney's production of media with the Volume technology. The implication is that the previously independent universes of Sony's Spiderman franchise and Fox's X-Men franchise from the early 2000s can only inhabit the same narrative space as Disney's MCU because the god of lies weaves them together in the interstitial void between technology and narrative. In the ongoing experiment of Disney's serialization of the Marvel cinematic universe, itself a kind of contemporary epic cycle, Loki, identified now as the god of stories, redeems an entire universe with the lie.

Lies and storytelling continue to delineate boundaries in cyberspace and the contemporary media landscape. Both anecdotes above speak to the confluence of classical motifs with contemporary attempts at space making that rely upon the lie and both speak to contemporary problems that can be served by a renewed focus on classical literary analysis of the epic herald that has, until very recently, evaded serious inquiry. A comparative approach to the herald addresses the interstitial glue that binds the forum to the American cineplex; it is the void where the imagination of a nebulous and pregnant classical space gives birth to the political discourse of the now.

Literature Selection

Studies concerning the epic manifestation of Mercury remain scarce. The dearth of critical attention stands in stark contrast to the popularity of the Mercurial figure in medieval and early modern literature. Publications like *Tracking Hermes/Mercury* in the past few years have

[11] Troy Yarter, "The Volume: How "The Mandalorian" Revolutionized Filmmaking," (*Illumin Magazine* 24, no. 1, 2024).

sought to bring more critical attention to the messenger god, but even with the renewed interest, much remains to be explored. Denis Feeney proposes that the messenger god's troublesome nature may be to blame as "generations of readers and scholars have come up with more or less ingenious techniques for writing the disruptive Mercury out of the story."[12] My dissertation responds to Feeney's work on allegory in Latin epic and his theory that Mercury is a manifestation of Aeneas' consciousness, a reading that does not stray very far from the work of late antique commentators.[13] Needless to say, new approaches to the old questions posed by Mercury's intrusive and brief interventions require further study.

My dissertation limits itself to extant Greco-Roman epic in its treatment of Hermes/Mercury to theorize the tension between authority and transmission of authority before considering how that treatment informs the reception of classical motifs in Dante's *Inferno*. My exclusive focus on epic poetry is important for making sense of Hermes/Mercury because of the genre's iterative nature, its centrality in the curricula of late antique and medieval education, and its enduring influence on construction of contemporary national narratives and identities.[14] Epic's oral roots speak to its iterability in that its form invites development and reconfiguration in that it defies closure while continuously grasping at it.[15] As a result, the epic mode allows for a

[12] Denis Feeney, "Leaving Dido: The Appearance(s) of Mercury and the Motivations of Aeneas," *A Woman Scorn'd: Responses to the Dido Myth*, (Faber and Faber, 1998): 105.

[13] See *Gods in Epic*, 1993 and "Leaving Dido: The Appearance(s) of Mercury in *Aeneid* 4," 1998.

[14] For a wider view of the integration of classical materials into the medieval university, see John J. Contreni, "Learning for God: Education in the Carolingian Age," *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 24 (2014): 89–129. In the case of medieval England in particular and its authors' familiarity with Vergil's texts, see Joseph P. McGowan, "Chaucer's Prioress: Et Nos Cedamus Amori," *The Chaucer Review* 38, no. 2 (2003): 199–202.

[15] For a detailed account of the genre's relationship to closure, see Philip Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition*. of *Roman Literature and Its Contexts*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

kind of intertextual or intergenerational call and response, which affords students of reception a unique opportunity to consider motifs and allegorical figures in the longue durée. Additionally, given that the Latin language was the basis for European education for centuries, a renewed focus on some of the shared linguistic and cultural models that underpin the development of vernacular traditions throughout the Middle-Ages is necessary to understand how the classical messenger is such a consistent and popular fixture of the epic narrative. Latin's ubiquity in medieval and early modern Europe allows for certain stories and tropes to cross cultural and historical boundaries more fluidly than other literary traditions, and Hermes/Mercury, as both the god of boundary stepping and language, presents a unique case study for exploring how literary forms travel through space and time.

Within the larger framework of classical reception, I devote a significant amount of attention to Vergil in my dissertation given his status as the greatest poet from antiquity.[16] Vergil's place of privilege among both classical and post-classical audiences assures us that authors responding to the classical tradition are at the very least familiar with the *Aeneid*'s adaptation of the Roman pantheon to the epic mode. Additionally, the *Aeneid*'s treatment of ancient Greek material allows contemporary readers of the Greco-Roman epic the opportunity to simultaneously look backwards and forwards since his work responds to the archaic Homer while it also inspires much later authors such as the medieval Dante. Vergil's popularity also allowed for the author to occupy numerous roles in the medieval and early modern imagination, including that of a sage, a magician, a prophet, and a trickster, and this multivalence speaks to a fragmentation that is essential in my understanding of Mercury's complicated and oppositional

[16] Fabio Stok, "Virgil between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance," (*International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1994): 15.

offices.[17]

Limitations

Due to the versatility of Mercury and the various spheres he inhabits, there are a few related subjects of inquiry that will not be addressed in my project. The works featured in my dissertation belong to a chain of epic receptions that touches on extant archaic Greek epic and the Vergilian reinvention of the ancient Greek material that will serve as the conduit between ancient and medieval/early modern representations of Mercury. I draw a distinction between this tradition and that of the messenger in other medieval and early modern genres. For example, while they are related, the heralds of the *Castle of Perseverance* who open the play or Shakespeare's Chorus at the beginning of *Henry V* belong to a separate courtly tradition, which includes announcers and narrators. The political emissary, ambassador or merchant is a more appropriate model for this kind of messenger. All three of these models navigate various socio-political spheres, however they lack the epic messenger's unique role as guide, psychopomp and trickster. In addition, I do not consider the Judeo-Christian angel in much detail since I view the reception of the pagan epic herald as a distinct tradition in post-classical literature. However, there is significant overlap between the two traditions, and I attempt to trace the Mercurial heritage of some angelic figures in my analysis.[18] Similarly, the comic, erotic and economic dimensions of Mercury are not crucial to my dissertation, though they may require future study.

In terms of epic poetry, my emphasis lies more with classical material and, therefore, I do not plan to explore vernacular folk traditions or mythologies from Europe that contain trickster

[17] Stok 1994, 18.

[18] Dante's figure *da ciel messo* ("sent from heaven" 9.85) in *Inferno* typifies this relationship.

or messenger figures.[19] I am less interested in constructing a complete genealogy of Hermes in Western literature than in analyzing how the Vergilian Mercury complicates the relationship between authority and the transmission of authority in the readings of long form Greco-Roman verse. I acknowledge that the category of epic is, like the figure of Mercury himself, malleable, and I do agree with Zrinka Stahuljak's contention that, to speak of genre in a medieval sense at least, is problematic.[20] Though I do not propose in my dissertation a new definition of epic, I do acknowledge that my use of the term "epic" is a shorthand for a complex practice that belongs to no single cultural context or writer.[21] Nonetheless, the consistency of the description, habits, and impact of Hermes/Mercury is striking and deserves its own investigation given the lack of focus by previous scholars of the god.[22]

[19] Figures such as the French Reynard the Fox and the Norse Loki, for example.

[20] Zrinka Stahuljak compelling demonstrates that it would be more accurate to speak of a work's "place" than its genre in the context of medieval literature: "I thus propose a library approach to genre that reinforces the (historical and material) notion of the work as an utterance in the medieval context: a literary work connected to its place and connected to the other works in the cluster of the collection in which we find the manuscript. The "place" to which it is connected at any particular moment, its discursive instance, is a book collection, a library. The "cluster" is a collectivity of manuscripts, whose analysis stands in contrast to the study of individual works or cycles, or their genealogies. We find such clusters in the categories of the library inventory," Zrinka Stahuljak, *Fixers: Agency, Translation, and the Early Global History of Literature,* (The University of Chicago Press, 2024): 226.

[21] Denis Feeney complicates the relationship between the epic form and the idea of an epic hero, for example in his article "Epic Hero and Epic Fable." Feeney demonstrates in this article how the concept of the epic hero is not a feature of the genre, but an imposition of neo-classical writers and critics: "He will be seen to be, in essence, a child of the Renaissance, a demanding child, but not universally successful in pressing his claims. In England he was given title and dominion by the neoclassicists, and it is by virtue of that authority that he still exercises his power," Denis Feeney, *Comparative Literature* 38, no. 2 (1986): 138.

[22] To ancient critics, the epic form has distinct and recognizable sequences, and the messenger's intervention was among those episodes: "The scholiasts and ancient commentators, however, did not develop an overarching concept for the analysis of this phenomenon; rather, they discussed the individual scenes separately according to their shared content: e.g. arming scenes, messenger scenes, and typical actions on the battlefield," Christiane Reitz and Simone Finkmann, "Introduction," *Structures of Epic Poetry: Vol. I: Foundations. Vol. II.1/II.2: Configuration. Vol. III: Continuity*, (De Gruyter, 2019): 1.

Methodology

Underpinning my reevaluation of Hermes/Mercury is a comparativist model of close reading, supported by philological language analysis. My dissertation works under the assumption that meaning does not derive from a single source, but it is inscribed onto a text due to complex social and historical practices. As a consequence, I focus on the construction of meaning at the site of reading in the vein of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault.[23] Whereas Barthes champions a model of reading that prioritizes the reader and reader-response over the author, Foucault argues that "the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses."[24] In his analysis, it is more important to understand how discourse shapes the writer's persona because the subject must be stripped of his or her creativity and considered as a form of discourse.[25] Nevertheless, both Barthes and Foucault inform my thinking on authorship insofar as I do not place the historical author at the center of my interpretive model. I follow Stephen Hinds's articulation of reception theory that every work represents the beginning of a new literary tradition.[26] I uphold Hinds's argument that all reading

[23] My dissertation relies on definitions of authorship in line with Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1969) and Roland Barthes's theory of "Death of the Author," (1967). For an overview of the death/rebirth of the author in contemporary literary criticism, see Kristina Busse, "The Return of the Author: Ethos and Identity Politics," In *Framing Fan Fiction: Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities*, 19–38, (University of Iowa Press, 2017).

[24] Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader / Edited by Paul Rabinow,* edited by Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984): 118-119.

[25] As Stahuljak reminds us, "any designation of "initiation" as "origin" is a retrospective construction. The designation of "origin" is a retrospective gesture that bestows on the source the force of the act, the performative force of origination, what the nineteenth century called genius and we now call creativity," Stahuljak 2024, 196.

[26] See Stephen Hinds, Allusion *and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry,* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

is interpretation.

My approach to Mercury's epic appearances is inspired in part by Denis Feeney's application of reception studies in *Epic Successors of Virgil* (2012), which considers how the cyclical nature of the epic mode invites revision and iteration due to its treatment of violence and also due to its incomplete nature, which the form inherits from its earliest performance contexts.[27] Rather than consider how this call and response fertilizes future readings through a chain of receptions, as Feeney argues, my dissertation shows how the text's own presentation of intervention makes alternate readings possible even from within the bounds of the text itself, which suggests that epic stories recreate meaning moment to moment alongside the primary diegesis.[28] A reevaluation of the role of the epic messenger reveals that alternate readings trigger alternate realities that Mercury alone can activate and govern as both a participant and director of the poem.

Nietzsche's Apolline and Dionysiac Dyad

In pursuit of the elusive Mercury, I supplement my philological analysis with the theoretical terminology of Nietzsche's Apolline and Dionysiac dichotomy from *The Birth of Tragedy* because it provides a vocabulary for thinking about the tension between the oppositional impulses of the epic herald both to lie and to faithfully represent the directives of Zeus' ultimate authority. Nietzsche argues that the Apolline and Dionysiac are "two different drives" in open

[27] For an overview of the epic genre's relationship to closure and violence, see Philip Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition*. of *Roman Literature and Its Contexts*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[28] My approach also builds on a thought exercise by Thomas Van Nortwick in his article, "Alternate Worlds in Homeric Epic," *The Classical World* 98, no. 4 (2005): 429–33. Van Nortwick ponders how Achilles and Odysseus can both exemplify and critique the concept of heroism in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by supposing that the heroes occupy two different worlds.

conflict, which inspire artistic endeavors.[29] I do not endorse his findings, but I find his dichotomy useful for thinking about the relationship between allegory and the composition of a literary work. I am not interested in drawing a simple taxonomy; after all, Nietzsche's categories are not firm anyway. As Nickolas Pappas reminds us, Nietzsche misrepresents Apollo's relationship to tragedy and to oracular speech throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*.[30] I will use the terms to identify Hermes'/Mercury's relationship to the arts and his competing directives as herald and trickster to illustrate how it is that he wrests control of the narrative away from other sources of authority or authorship such as Apollo or Zeus. Like Nietzsche who "hopes to conjure the absent presence of Dionysus," in *The Birth of Tragedy*, my project also mines the liminal space of the dream to locate Mercury.[31]

To Nietzsche, though Apollo and Dionysos share the title of god of the arts, they nevertheless represent "two different drives (Triebe)" that are fundamentally opposed to one another in both their origin and goals.[32] Though there is disagreement among scholars as to how Nietzsche uses the term "drive" in his work, I follow Sebastian Gardner's definition that drive is "an enduring motivational state with broad scope which overtakes and subsumes, without displacing, explanation in terms of reasons for action."[33] To Nietzsche, the Apolline and

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[29] Friedrich Nietzsche, Raymond Geuss, and Ronald Speirs, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP 1999): 14.

[30] For a comprehensive list of problems with Nietzsche's categorization of Apolline semblance see Nickolas Pappas, "Nietzsche's Apollo," (*Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2014): pp. 43–53.

[31] Stephen Mulhall, "Orchestral Metaphysics: *The Birth of Tragedy* between Drama, Opera, and Philosophy," (*Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2013): 263.

[32] Nietzsche 1999, 14.

[33] Sebastian Gardner, "Nietzsche and Freud: The 'I' and Its Drives" In *Nietzsche and the Problem of Subjectivity* edited by João Constancio, Maria Joao Mayer Branco and Bartholomew Ryan, (Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015): 368.

Dionysiac are fundamental forces engaged in an endless struggle for expression, and they can only be reconciled temporarily before giving away to dissolution.[34]

In Nietzsche's system, the Apolline drive represents the image-maker, whose rational imagination is responsible for the production of artistic products. The epic poet belongs to the Apolline drive since their approach to artistic production is cerebral, methodical, and firmly rooted in a shared system of epic motifs and signs. If Apollo is the deity "whose gestures and gaze speak to us of all the intense pleasure, wisdom and beauty of 'semblance,'"[35] he is also the god of traditional mimetic forms. Apollo represents "light, beauty, measure, prophecy, poetry, and plastic arts".[36]

The Dionysiac, in contrast, arises out of a state of "*intoxication*".[37] The Dionysiac is at core a blurring of distinctions. The metaphor of intoxication succinctly demonstrates this confusion of boundaries in that "Dionysiac stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting."[38] As opposed to the cerebral and individualistic experience of the Apolline image-maker/poet/composer, one under the influence of the Dionysiac endures a breakdown of the *principium individuationis* ("the principle of individualization") in favor of a communal experience.[39]

If the Apolline stands for traditional semblance and representation, the Dionysiac

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[34] Nietzsche 1999, 11-15.

[35] Nietzsche 1999, 17.

[36] Lawrence Hatab, "Apollo and Dionysus: Nietzschean Expressions of the Sacred," in *Nietzsche and the Gods*, edited by Weaver Santaniello (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001): 49.

[37] Nietzsche 1999, 14.

[38] Nietzsche 1999, 17.

[39] Nietzsche 1999, 25.

represents something more fluid and adaptable.[40] Apollo is the Olympian half of the Greek spirit, which looks upwards into a conceptual world of forms and beauty, whereas Dionysos is the Chthonic half, which considers the mess of emotion in the world below and all worldly experience.[41] The dyad reflects, in general terms, the opposition between form and formlessness, which is always in flux.[42] In essence, "Apollo brings a more 'cultured' shape to the more 'natural' force of sheer Dionysian experience" in Nietzsche's conception.[43]

This dissertation makes a recuperative reading of Nietzsche that divorces psychology from philology by mining his dichotomy of the gods to analyze the tension between the faithful delivery of information and the lie. A philological approach that centers speech has the benefit of engaging the god of speech on his own terms. Mercury, Like Dionysos, evades simple categorization, so in order to make sense of the effects of his speech within the confines of the diegesis, we need to explore how language frames the successes and failures of his interventions.[44]

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[40] "Dionysus is primarily present in the elusive, dissonant rhythm or pulse—at once synchronic and diachronic—orchestrated by Nietzsche's animated collage or frieze of various attempts to represent him (and to deny him). each is thereby disclosed as at once similar to and yet different from every other, both individual and typical, with strengths and limitations all of its own; hence each makes an indispensable contribution to the overall display, but neither any individual element nor some conjunction of them—not even their reincorporation into the larger representation that is BT—can constitute a complete or total image of Dionysus. it is rather in the book's ragged edges and internal seams, its overt refusal to cohere as a single, totalizing representation and its openness to further insertions or extensions (a Frankenstein's monster of ecstatic scholarship), that its real attempt to present the god of the unrepresentable is to be found," Mulhall 1999, 261.

[41] Hatab 2001, 49.

[42] Hatab 2001, 49.

[43] Hatab 2001, 50.

[44] After all, Mulhall reminds us, Dionysos "has so many different manifestations in [*The Birth of Tragedy*] that no particular one (whether religious, artistic, or metaphysical) can be taken as truly representing him." It is precisely this kind of tension that my analysis explores with Mercury, the god

Queering the Paratext

I identify the liminal space of the dream in which Mercury operates in the *Aeneid* as a kind of literary side-space that I call the *nusquam* ("nowhere"). My identification and analysis of the *nusquam* in Chapter 2 relies upon Karen Barad's definition of the void in their work on the inherent queerness of nature and Gérard Genette's concept of the paratext.

In order to explore the impact of the Mercurial figure's interventions on the diegesis of epic poetry, this dissertation applies Gérard Genette's paratext to Karen Barad's model of the agential realism, which challenges the relationship between language and matter. A paratext, according to Genette, is any text connected to, but excluded from, the main body of the work in question, such as "an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations." The paratext complements the text and limits its scope insofar as the paratext is

> the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public. Rather than with a limit or a sealed frontier, we are dealing in this case with a *threshold*.[45]

At the center of my own intervention is the question of how Hermes/Mercury, the god of boundaries, manipulates a series of thresholds between heralds and authority, speech and action, as well as space and language. It is not the task of this dissertation to challenge or reinterpret the idea of the paratext, but to further complicate the problem of unity or, what Koenraad Claes calls "totality," that contemporary narratological studies of the paratext do.[46] For Claes and others, the

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who oscillates between both Nietzschean poles in the Greco-Roman imagination of the divine interlocutor, Mulhall 1999, 261.

[45] Genette 1991, 261.

[46] "If one philosophical problem can be said to have been ubiquitous since the second half of the twentieth century, it would be that of the questionable self-evidence of "Totality" as both a cognitive and an ethical

issue is what constitutes a text and how we should engage with or reproduce an older text.[47] This dissertation serves to complement that work by proposing that the intervention of the epic herald introduces a previously unidentified paratext, created and regulated by the Mercurial figure, that exists within the bounds of the epic diegesis itself and operates as the axis along which the narrative revolves.

Karen Barad's interdisciplinary approach to nature provides two key paradigms to my own literary approach; that matter and meaning are inseparable and that space, like nature, is queer in that it rejects categorization.[48] Barad's work on agential realism and transmaterialities, like Claes, challenges the idea of totality in a material sense. Karen Barad's model of agential realism explains how matter and meaning are intertwined and works to apply problems of quantum entanglement to questions of culture. On a basic level, Barad's work suggests that it is research, the act of measurement itself, that bridges matter and meaning.[49] Related to this theory is Barad's work on nature, which asserts that the observable universe is fundamentally queer insofar as the matter that comprises the universe is in a constant state of flux. Using the findings of quantum physics, Barad argues that

> Virtual particles are not present (and not absent), but they are material. In fact, most of what matter is, is virtual. Virtual particles do not traffic in a metaphysics of presence. They do not exist in space and time. They are ghostly non/existences that teeter on the

concept," Koenraad Claes, "Supplements and Paratext: The Rhetoric of Space," (*Victorian Periodicals Review*, Volume 43, Number 2, Summer 2010): 196.

[47] For an analysis of what constitutes a distinct boundary between paratexts in medieval manuscripts see Sirkku Ruokkeinen and Aino Liira, "Material Approaches to Exploring the Borders of Paratext," (*Textual Cultures* 11, no. 1/2 2017): 106–29. For further information about emergent issues related to paratexts and media consumption in the 21st century see Melanie Schiller, "Transmedia Storytelling: New Practices and Audiences." In *Stories*, edited by Ian Christie and Annie van den Oever, (Amsterdam University Press, 2018): 97–108.

[48] Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," (*Qui Parle* 19, no. 2 2011): 121–122.

[49] Barad 2012, 43-44.

> edge of the infinitely fine blade between being and nonbeing. Virtuality is admittedly difficult to grasp. Indeed, this is its very nature.[50]

In other words, there is no natural state of matter.[51]Additionally, there is no such thing as nothingness, as "the void is an endless exploration of all possible couplings of virtual particles."[52] To speak of nature, then, is to speak about only a momentary probability made possible, moment to moment, by observation. My dissertation applies this idea to the imagination of space in the *Aeneid* to talk about how the concept of space is also, in the imagination of the epic genre, queer insofar as it does not belong to a gendered power hierarchy.

Mercury is the only force capable of activating and governing alternate stories from within a paratext of his own making. Using the language of Barad's transmaterialities in conjunction with the paratext demonstrates that contemporary problems of quantum entanglement are not new to the epic mode, as the Mercurial figure mobilizes alternative voices and histories in its creation of space. Mercury, in the language of Barad, is a kind of ancient agent of agential realism, who operates as both the medium and the message of the epic diegesis.

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[50] Karen Barad, "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-Turning, Re-Membering, and Facing the Incalculable," In *Eco-Deconstruction: Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Matthias Fritsch, Philippe Lynes, and David Wood, 1st ed., 206–48. (Fordham University Press, 2018): 231-232.

[51] Barad observes, "it's not that (in erasing the information after the fact that) the experimenter changes a past that had already been present. Rather, the point is that the past was never simply there to begin with and the future is not simply what will unfold; rather, the "past" and the "future" are iteratively reworked and enfolded through the iterative practices of spacetimemattering," Barad 2011, 145.

[52] For a persuasive example of this concept, Barad describes the formation of a lightning bolt: "A lightning bolt is not a straightforward resolution of the buildup of a charge difference between the earth and a storm cloud: a lightning bolt does not simply proceed from storm cloud to the earth along a unidirectional (if somewhat erratic) path; rather, flirtations alight here and there and now and again as stepped leaders and positive streamers gesture toward possible forms of connection to come. The path that lightning takes not only is not predictable but does not make its way according to some continuous unidirectional path between sky and ground. Though far from microscopic in scale, it seems that we are witnessing a quantum form of communication — a process of iterative intra-activity," Karen Barad, 2012. "Nature's Queer Performativity*," (*Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*, nr. 1-2 marts, 2012): (398)

The process by which the paratext of the *nusquam* forms through the intervention of the Mercurial figure activates the pregnant void of a literary material-discursive.

Literature Review

The difficulty of dealing with epic Hermes/Mercury traces back at least to late antique commentaries from the 4th and 5th centuries. In Servius' 4th century commentary on the Aeneid, he argues that Mercury's appearance in Book 4 does not actually happen and that *non enim re uera est* ("it is not in fact true").[53] Since Servius' attempt to grapple with the discomfort of Mercury's appearance by subsuming his role into a larger allegorical framework, most commentators and scholars have largely done the same, though contemporary studies concerning the epic manifestation of Mercury remain scarce. Publications like *Tracking Hermes/Mercury* in the past five years have sought to bring more critical attention to the messenger god, but even with the renewed interest, much remains to be explored. Denis Feeney proposes that the messenger god's troublesome nature itself may be to blame, but even in his attempt to recuperate Mercury he relies on an allegorical reading that has its roots in the oldest commentaries of Vergil."[54] My dissertation responds to Feeney's work on allegory in Latin epic and other attempts to internalize, and thereby suppress, Mercury's roles, despite the god' insistent participation in the *Aeneid*.[55]

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[53] Servius, Christopher Michael, McDonough, Richard E. Prior, Mark Stansbury, and Virgil, *Servius' Commentary on Book Four of Virgil's Aeneid: An Annotated Translation*, (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2002): 119.

[54] Feeney 1998, 105.

[55] See Feeney's *Gods in Epic*, 1993 and "Leaving Dido: The Appearance(s) of Mercury in *Aeneid* 4," 1998. For more information about the history of scholars' inclination to allegorize Mercury's appearances see J. Ward Jones, "*Aeneid* 4.238-278 and the Persistence of an Allegorical Interpretation," (*Vergilius (1959-)*, vol. 33, 1987): 29–37.

Few scholars have treated the figure of Mercury in Latin epic in the last one hundred years. The most recent work on the god pulls primarily from two comprehensive projects by E.L. Harrison and Denis Feeney. Harrison's older article, *Vergil's Mercury* from 1982, is preoccupied primarily with identifying Homeric antecedents for various episodes involving the messenger god, and as such does not do much to address various implications of Mercury's presence. It was not until Feeney's article, "Leaving Dido: The Appearance(s) of Mercury and the Motivations of Aeneas" from 1998 that scholarship began to seriously consider the herald on his own terms. Since Feeney's attempt to articulate a theory on intervention and allegory, there has been an influx of scholarship on Mercury spearheaded by Jenny Strauss Clay and John Miller. Their conference *Tracking Hermes/Mercury* and the subsequent publication of articles from that conference constitute the most comprehensive look at the messenger god's appearances in classical literature. A cursory look at the titles from this collection demonstrates just how difficult it is to treat the discourse of Hermes/Mercury in any one context, religious, literary or otherwise. My dissertation will mostly interface with scholarship on the god's epic manifestation and looks to the work of Jenny Strauss Clay, Erin Moodie, and S.J. Harrison.

The Allegorical Mercury

The history of studies of the epic Hermes/Mercury has been marked by a series of battles over solutions to various allegorical models and how to fit the complicated offices of Hermes/Mercury into those models. The tension of building a coherent model for the god of contradictions stretches as far back as the 4th and 5th centuries CE. The following brief survey of the textual history of dealing with the intrusiveness of Hermes/Mercury demonstrates how little the critical discourse has changed about the epic messenger in the past two thousand years.

Servius' 4th century commentary on the *Aeneid*, unable to reconcile the two different appearances of Mercury in Book 4, elects to delegitimize Mercury's authority in his Aeneas' dream. Though Aeneas does not immediately depart Carthage after being warned by Mercury in Book 4 that he is in imminent danger and falls asleep instead, Servius writes,

> § 4.555 CARPEBAT **SOMNOS** hoc est quod et paulo post culpat Mercurius, dicens 'nate dea, potes hoc sub casu ducere somnos?' sed excusatur his rebus: nam et certus eundi fuerat, et rite cuncta praeparaverat: aut certe prooeconomia est, ut possit videre Mercurium.
>
> ("4.555 **WAS ENJOYING SLEEP** this is the thing for which shortly after Mercury reproaches him. But the sleep is excused by these things: for he had been both determined to depart and he has thoroughly prepared everything: or else it is a previous arrangement, so that he is able to see Mercury").

Because, according to Servius, Aeneas was in the process of preparing all his affairs *rite* ("rightly") he cannot be reprimanded for sleeping after Mercury's first visit, and therefore, the second appearance would be unnecessary or histrionic on the god's part. Though Servius takes pains to point out the ambiguities of the episode, he does not offer an explanation for them. He strongly hints that the episode is the product of an anxious mind, but he does not fully endorse any single reading: *aliud enim est idem esse, aliud simile esse: ergo non est certus Aeneas* ("for it is one thing to be the same and another to be similar: therefore Aeneas is unsure").[56] Regardless of its significance, Servius situates Mercury's appearance within the confines of Aeneas' mind, opting to internalize the god's function and to invite the reader to fit the episode into their own allegorical reading.

In the 5th century CE *Expositio virgilianae*, Fulgentius provides his own totalizing allegorical interpretation of the *Aeneid*, which, like Servius' commentary, dismisses Mercury's intervention. In Fulgentius' allegorical reading of the *Aeneid*, the major events of the poem

[56] Servius 2002, 119.

correspond to the maturation of a human being. In this reading of the *Aeneid* as a bildungsroman, Mercury is nothing more than Aeneas' guilty conscience: *Mercurio instigante libidinis suae male praesumptum amorem relinquit; Mercurius enim deus ponitur ingenii* ("After Mercury urges him on, [Aeneas] abandons the ill-conceived love of his desire; since Mercury is the god of the *ingenium*").[57]

Martianus Capella, in his 5th century CE philosophical treatise, *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, uses an allegorical model to diagram a late antique model of education placing Mercury's speech at the center. In Book 1, Capella relates the marriage of Mercury to the figure of Philology, or learning. This story has no basis in Greco-Roman myth but considers the various roles that the gods represent in a philosophical model of existence.[58] In the dense and abstract description of the gods and abstract deities, Mercury marries Philology after considering Wisdom, Prophecy and Psyche ("soul"). While all these aspects complement Mercury's nature, they are otherwise incompatible for various reasons. Ultimately, it is Philology's ability to penetrate the *immodico…arcana labore* ("the secrets of knowledge with unsparing toil") and impel *deos… in iussa coactos* ("gods under compulsion to obey her decrees") through reason that makes her a suitable partner for Mercury's inquisitive intellect.[59] Philology softens the rough edges of Mercury's intellectual endeavors, and their union represents the ideal model for the scholar. The works of Servius, Fulgentius, and Capella reflect a tension that Augustine identifies

[57] *Expositio*.20-22. Text from Fulgentius, trans. Rudolf Helm, *Fabii Planciadis Fulgentii v. c. Opera: accedunt Fabii Claudii Gordiani Fulgentii v. c. De aetatibus mundi et hominis et S. Fulgentii episcopi Super Thebaiden*, (Lipsiae, 1898): 94.

[58] Ahuvia Kahane, "Apuleius and Martianus Capella: Reception, Pedagogy, and the Dialectics of Canon," In *The Afterlife of Apuleius*, edited by Florence Bistagne, Carole Boidin, and Raphaële Mouren, (University of London Press, 2021): 111.

[59] Martianus Capella, William Harris Stahl, Richard Johnson and E.L. Burge, *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, (Columbia University Press, 1977): 14.

as a problem between power and the linguistic representation of that power.

Augustine's polemic against pagan religion, in *De civitate dei,* is only interested in Hermes/Mercury insofar as his representation of natural or unnatural phenomena in order to place the god's offices within an allegorical schema that describes the larger universe. Augustine laments, in his 5th century treatise, that Hermes enjoys more power than Zeus himself in depictions of the Greco-Roman gods. Though Augustine does not directly address *Aeneid* 4 in *De civitate dei*, he does address a similar tension about the intrusiveness of Mercury that characterizes the previous three works. In Chapter 7 of *De civitate dei*, while Augustine refutes some of the basic tenets of the pagan civic religion, he pairs the gods Mercury and Mars together because their *sermocinandi et belligerandi administros* ("powers of speaking and waging war") are not found in nature.[60] Since communication and warfare are not natural forces, according to Augustine, they must be inferior offices, and therefore they should not influence or govern the behavior of the more powerful gods. Setting aside the issue of Augustine's dismissal of both gods' multivalent offices, Augustine expresses discomfort with Mercury's relationship to Jupiter as his representative. Augustine argues that, if Mercury were to speak on behalf of the king of

[60] Augustine is so perturbed by the idea that Mercury can speak on behalf of God that he writes:

> Mercurium uero et Martem quo modo referrent ad aliquas partes mundi et opera Dei, quae sunt in elementis, non inuenerunt, et ideo eos saltem operibus hominum praeposuerunt, sermocinandi et belligerandi administros. Quorum Mercurius si sermonis etiam deorum potestatem gerit, ipsi quoque regi deorum dominatur, si secundum eius arbitrium Iuppiter loquitur aut loquendi ab illo accepit facultatem; quod utique absurdum est
>
> ("But in the case of Mercury and Mars they could not find a way to assign them to any parts of the world, or activities of God in the elements, and so instead they put them in charge of human activities as helpers in speaking and in waging war. If Mercury exercises power over the speech of gods as well, he becomes the master of the very king of the gods, that is, if Jupiter speaks according to Mercury's pleasure, or has received from him his faculty of speech. And this is certainly absurd.")

Augustine, *City of God, Volume V: Books 16-18.35,* translated by Eva M. Sanford, William M. Green, (Loeb Classical Library 415. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965): 422-425.

the gods, he would himself rule over the king of the gods. To Augustine, this power dynamic is *absurdum*, but this tension he identifies and violently rejects is the very nature of Mercurial speech. For Augustine's imagination of the universe, Mercury, as the embodiment of communication, cannot claim more power than the spirit of the power or information. I will not be relitigating the power of language in my analysis of the epic herald, since the relationship between form/function and message/messenger have been thoroughly explored in multiple disciplines.[61] Nonetheless, because Mercury does not fit neatly into an allegorical reading of the gods that would align the cosmic hierarchy according to the various powers of their offices, Augustine hopes to discredit the pagan worldview.

It is important to consider these early critiques of Mercury and attempts to allegorize or to subsume his intrusiveness into a larger allegorical framework because, despite J. Ward Jones complaints in his 1987 article in *Vergilius*, "*Aeneid* 4.238-278 and the Persistence of an Allegorical Interpretation" most contemporary analyses of the herald attempt to do the same.[62] Although there has been a spark of renewed interest in the god, most analyses of the messenger continue to uphold the allegorical readings in the vein of Servius, Fulgentius, or Capella in which Mercury is a supporting character in a larger story. This approach reflects a strategy of trying to fit the unruly Mercury into a single mode or reading rather than consider how Mercury's presence creates branches/fractures a single reading into multiple possibilities. For example, when it comes to the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, recent scholarship revolves around arguments that domesticate Hermes' trickster impulses or hierarchize different kinds of power or speech between Apollo and Hermes. Consider Christopher Bungard's "Reconsidering Zeus' Order: The

[61] From Michel Foucault to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.

[62] Jones 1987, 29–37.

Reconciliation of Apollo and Hermes" from 2012 that contends that reconciliation between the offices of the two brothers is possible, preferred, or transformative–which is another way of subjugating Hermes to an external order–making Apollo and Hermes complementary and productive partners. These kinds of analyses reflect a concern that Hermes poses problems that require interventions rather than explore how the intervention of the messenger itself is solving problems within the text.[63] Latin studies are not immune from the same inclination. Lee Frantantuono's recent article on the Vergilian Mercury makes the case that Mercury is a marker of Italian national identity that triumphs over Trojan cultural heritage. Whereas Stephen Harrison argues that Mercury's appearance signals an allegorical shift from republican to imperial ideology through a shift from oral to visual culture.[64] Lee Fratantuono and Sergio Casali approach the question of allegory and Mercury structurally and demonstrate how Mercury's liminal status reflects larger thematic anxieties about philosophy and intertextuality.[65] In each of the previous studies, Mercury is the focus of a discussion about allegory and literary devices, which suggest that the intervention of the epic messenger represents a kind of intrusion on the naturalism of the Dido episode within the *Aeneid*.

Allelopoiesis (Transformation)

Building on Barad's challenge to the uniformity of the natural world, my intervention

[63] See Jenny Straus Clay's essential work on the stabilization of the Olympic pantheon in the *Homeric Hymns* in, Jenny Strauss Clay, *The Politics of Olympus: Form and Meaning in the Major Homeric Hymns*, (Bristol Classical Press, 2006).

[64] See Chapter 2, "Virgil and Homer" from K. W. Gransden, S. J. Harrison, *Virgil: the Aeneid,* Landmarks of World Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[65] See Lee Fratantuono, "*Lethaeum Ad Fluvium*: Mercury in the *Aeneid*," (*Pallas*, no. 99 2015): 295–310, and Sergio Casali, "Crossing the Borders: Vergil's Intertextual Mercury," in John F. Miller, and Jenny Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury* (Oxford, 2019).

also responds to *Allelopoiesis*, an emergent approach to reception studies. *Allelopoiesis*, or "transformation," attempts to solve some of the problems posed by reception studies by decentering the idea that reception is composed of just a single interaction between a text and its reader.[66] The idea, which began in Humboldt University in Berlin around 2004, and which scholars at Texas A and M now champion, builds on Martindale's assertion that every reading/point of reception constitutes a new reading. However, scholars belonging to this school of thought prefer the term transformation to reception because they believe that it better describes how reading modifies and construes the reference.[67] Importantly, the relationship between the reference sphere (that which is received) and the reception sphere (that which receives) is reciprocal.[68] A great deal of the transformation process involves categorizing the various ways in which reciprocation happens, however, there are three primary categories. A reference object can be included, excluded, or recombined into the reception sphere.[69] In the same spirit, Craig Kallendorf considers how transformation explains why a Renaissance Vergil seems so "strange" and "foreign" to modern scholars.[70] While a modern scholar might expect

[66] The term allelopoiesis is a neologism "formed from the Greek roots *allelon* (mutual, reciprocal) and *poesis* (creation, generation)," Lutz Bergemann, "Transformation: A Concept for the Study of Cultural Change," In *Beyond Reception: Renaissance Humanism and the Transformation of Classical Antiquity* edited by Patrick Baker, Johannes Helmrath and Craig Kallendorf, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019): 9-12.

[67] Craig Kallendorf, "Tradition, Reception, Transformation: Allelopoiesis and the Creation of the Humanist Virgil," In *Beyond Reception: Renaissance Humanism and the Transformation of Classical Antiquity* edited by Patrick Baker, Johannes Helmrath and Craig Kallendorf, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019): 136.

[68] Patrick Baker, Johannes Helmrath, and Craig Kallendorf, "Introduction" In *Beyond Reception: Renaissance Humanism and the Transformation of Classical Antiquity* edited by Patrick Baker, Johannes Helmrath and Craig Kallendorf, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2019): 4.

[69] Baker 2019, 4.

[70] Kallendorf 2019, 133.

Vergil to represent a stable category given his placement at the center of curricula for hundreds of years, transformation allows us to see how the Vergil of the *Eclogues* and the Vergil of the *Aeneid* may be substituted or converted to fit a different rhetorical or religious context at the same moment in time. Perhaps the biggest distinction between reception and transformation is the relationship of a given reading to time insofar as transformation is a retroactive process that considers how future readings reframe or recast the past. In other words, scholars who work on transformation might consider how Dante's interpretation of the *Aeneid* forever changes our relationship to Vergil. Reception, on the other hand, focuses on a point of contact between past and present at the level of the reference sphere and how the more contemporary context reframes the past for its own moment.

Ultimately, transformation provides a framework to consider Mercury's relationship to history and literary traditions insofar as that relationship is not linear. Just as "it is impossible to continue envisioning Virgilian reception as something passive," the messenger god's ability to negotiate the lie in his treatment of the past is a creative project that not only redirects the epic narrative at the point of intervention, but it also untethers the diegesis from prior literary conventions and historical realities.[71] In the same way that a scholar of transformation considers how readings at a given point in time transform the past, so too does Mercury sever the epic narrative from a single reading of the past when he mobilizes the lie in his interventions.

Vergil and Post-Classical Authorship

My dissertation responds to studies about pre-modern authorship and its multivalence by exploring the unexamined role of Mercury and his contribution to the epic register's speech acts.

[71] Kallendorf 2019, 146.

Because this dissertation considers the ways in which language makes space for alterity in the epic mode, it necessarily prioritizes the individual text over its author. While I recognize that there is a renewed emphasis on the historical author, the strain of scholarship on reception continues to evolve at pace, as transformation studies makes clear. It is not my goal to diminish or marginalize the important work being done on the historical author, however, I am most interested in the construction of the discourse of authorship on a theoretical level, and therefore I favor reception and the study of the reciprocal nature of reading over the identification of an unmediated authorial voice. This preference is partly inspired by the communal and oral nature of the epic genre, which, by the nature of its composition, belonged to no single body. The Mercurial figure's origins in the performance context of Greek epic and its persistence in the adaptation of the epic form for thousands of years presents us with a unique opportunity to study a process untethered to any one source.

The Mercurial figure's relationship to the fragmentation of authority supplements work on pre-modern authorship by further complicating the relationship between ancient and premodern literary formulations. Albert Ascoli contends that literary *auctoritas* in the medieval period was stable and belonged solely to the ancients.[72] Whereas scholars have often attributed the birth of the modern discourse of authorship to Petrarch, Ascoli makes the case that it is in fact Dante who first embodies Foucault's author-function in the West.[73] Dante accomplishes this by assuming the three different kinds of *auctoritas* as outlined in Hugutio of Pisa's etymology of

[72] Albert Russell Ascoli, "From Auctor to Author: Dante before the Commedia," In *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, edited by Rachel Jacoff, Cambridge Companions to Literature, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 49-50, 55.

[73] Ascoli 2007, 47.

the word, which covers political, philosophical, and poetic authority.[74] Whereas Ascoli is interested in complicating the timeline of the emergence of the author-function in the discourse of the West, in Chapter 3 I further destabilize the idea that the author-function can be located neatly in time or space or that only one voice governs the diegesis of the epic narrative. In addition, I echo Alistair Minnis's position in *Medieval Theory of Authorship* that scholars working on reception can look to medieval and early modern treatments of authorship to discuss issues of theory. We cannot fully understand the literature of a culture without understanding how it entered the discourse of that culture.[75]

The unbroken popularity of Vergil's work for the past two thousand years makes for an important case study on the discourse of authorship.[76] It is especially important to my dissertation as I attribute the crystallization of the Latin epic messenger to Vergil. Both Fabio Stok and Craig Kallendorf consider the ways in which competing biographical traditions coexist in the medieval and early modern period. Stok considers how the biographic material of the Vergilian *Lives,*[77] which usually preceded copies of Vergil's work, gave way to legends. Between the 12th and 14th centuries anecdotes that emphasize Vergil's role as a sage and a wizard replace the *Lives* in collected editions of Vergil's oeuvre.[78] At the center of these anecdotes is an author-figure who intervenes on behalf of communities in Southern Italy through the use of

[74] Ascoli 2007, 55.

[75] Alastair Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): 7.

[76] Stok 1994, 15.

[77] Including Donatus' *Vita Vergiliana*, St. Jerome's *Chronicon*, Philargyrius' *Commentary* and the *Vita Bernensis* among others. See Stok for a comprehensive list.

[78] Stok 1994, 18.

white magic.[79] In the middle of the Renaissance, Vergil begins to assume "Faust-like" powers relating to black magic.[80] Kallendorf, using a similar methodology, considers how two potentially opposing traditions of the reception of the *Aeneid* persist to the present day. He makes the case that pessimistic readings of the epic poem in the twentieth century do not constitute a break in the history of the poem's reception but build on a history of negative readings from Filelfo's *Sphortias* to Milton's *Paradise Lost*. From just these two sources, it is clear that reading in the premodern world was neither uncomplicated nor monolithic. Contradictory readings were not only possible, but they were also standard for thinking through issues of classical authorship.

I am in agreement with Zrinka Stahuljak that the contemporary impulse to ascribe the contemporary understanding of authorship to premodern literature is reductive and ahistorical, and it is the case that the Mercurial figure represents an ancient literary device that fulfills a similar role to that of Stahuljak's medieval fixer. The fixer is Stahuljak's proposed term for the medieval writer who inhabits "the position of mediators, as actors between the divine word and the human object (text, book)."[81] Though "fixers are intermediaries who always do linguistic work," language is not their exclusive purview "since their work encompasses the work of intermediation broadly conceived."[82] The Mercurial figure is an intermediary, but he is less of an interpreter and more of a fixer, according to Zrinka Stahuljak's term, insofar as his "linguistic skill is the medium but not the end in itself" as his duties extend beyond the transmission of

[79] Stok 1994, 19.

[80] Stok 1994, 19.

[81] Stahuljak 2024, 201.

[82] Stahuljak 2024, 7.

speech to guiding, directing souls, and bringing sleep in just his epic manifestation.[83] If the three principles of the fixer's apparatus are "Language difference, conflict, and multifunctional positionality (with agency)," Mercury exhibits two out of the three features. Mercury only deploys when there is a threat to the smooth completion of the narrative and conflict threatens to overwhelm the poem. Additionally, Mercury is not a recording device and exhibits a great deal of agency in the content and presentation of his directives. However, Mercury is not translating from one language or cultural context to another. In place of language, Mercury mediates a difference in relative power between the king of the gods and human actors.

Because I complicate the idea of a single voice or source of authorship in the epic form, I do not take up the body of the fixer in my dissertation because in the amorphous shape of the Mercurial figure it is impossible to disentangle a single voice among the many possible perspectives in the *nusquam* of the epic mode, which relies on communal performance and oral traditions. Another distinction that I draw in this dissertation is that the focus of my analysis is the role of the lie and the messenger's impulse to obscure or render aspects of his intervention unintelligible. A key component of the fixer is that they make "the apparatus of fixers makes visible what is relevant to most, if not all, human interactions" by making the world intelligible to a third party.[84] A major distinction between Stahuljak's fixer and the Mercurial figure is that the Mercurial figure wields unintelligibility as a tool, and the deployment of the lie in the brokering of his interventions is necessary to make multiple outcomes possible at once.

Hermes/Mercury and Intervention

[83] Stahuljak 2024, 7.

[84] Stahuljak 2024, 11.

There are a few recent examples of emergent scholarship that link the Hermes/Mercury to problems of genre and translation that lay the foundation for my own analysis. Denis Feeney's seminal work, *Gods in Epic: Poets and Critics of the Classical Tradition,* serves as the basis for my thinking on the relationship between author (or poet) and the gods in the epic mode. As Feeney argues, the literary discourse of the gods belonged exclusively to poets until the sixth century BCE and he notes that the introduction of literary criticism constitutes a break in that monopoly.[85] The power of the poet, then, to contribute to the theorization of literature is central to the construction of the epic narrative. The epic poet, and not the scholar, is responsible for articulating the author's role in his reading. While I acknowledge that the relationship of the gods to a classical audience is fraught with questions of religious practice and observance, I follow Feeney's contention that the epic representation of the gods constitutes a phenomenon that is "not something divorced from its religious and cultural context, but a form of speech with its own definitive and characteristic modes."[86] The unique mode of epic poetry invites a closer look at the kinds of speech acts that make the diegesis possible, and Mercury, the god of speech, is an untapped resource.

First and foremost, my dissertation makes clear that Mercury, more so than representations of other gods in the epic tradition, can exert an influence on the poetic narrative from within the confines of the paratextual dream space or *nusquam*. The methodology used by Erin Moodie and Strauss Clay is essential to my own thinking on the topic of authorship, both of whom make gestures towards linking the messenger god to various functions of authorship or literary production. I intend to augment their work and apply their findings to Latin epic and the

[85] Feeney 1993, 5.

[86] Feeney 1993, 4.

reception of Latin epic in relation to the broader discourse of authorship. Scholars have treated this relationship in comedy, lyric poetry and Greek epic only, and therefore much remains to be said in relation to the contribution of Latin epic to the topic. Though Erin Moodie's work touches on Mercury's manifestation in comedy and Jenny Strauss Clay writes about Greek epic, both scholars demonstrate how the messenger god's flexibility lends itself to the discourse of literary production. Moodie argues that Hermes/Mercury's knowledge of theatrical convention coupled with his metatheatrical presentation in Aristophanes' *Peace* and Plautus' *Amphitryon* makes him an appropriate patron of comedy.[87] Her argument relies upon the idea that Mercury operates as an intermediary between audience and stage. Similarly, Strauss Clay explores the same idea through the link between Odysseus and Hermes in *The Odyssey*.[88] However, Strauss Clay restricts the implications of her observation to a brief conclusion in her paper, in which she states,

> Like the god, the bard with his lyre enchants the tribes of men, by traversing heaven, earth, and the nether regions, and mediating the divine song of the Muses to us mortals. Finally, Homer may be the greatest trickster of all.[89]

While Strauss Clay makes the leap from god to poet offhandedly in the final sentence of her article, the implication of her remark is huge and demands further study.

The Hermes Complex and Anxiety of Influence

S. J. Harrison and Charles Le Blanc make the leap between poet and god more explicit

[87] See Erin K. Moodie, "Hermes/Mercury: God of Comedy?" in John F. Miller, and Jenny Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury*, (Oxford University Press, 2019): 107–121.

[88] See Jenny Strauss Clay, "Hide and Go Seek: Hermes in Homer," in John F. Miller, and Jenny Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury*, (Oxford University Press, 2019): pp. 67–79.

[89] Strauss Clay 2019, 76.

through examinations that make Hermes/Mercury an analogue for the author. In "Horace's Mercury and Mercurial Horace" from 2019, Harrison makes the case that the representation of Mercury navigates different genres within Horace's corpus and mirrors the bards own social advancement and movement between low and high genres.[90] However, Harrison stops short of making any claims about this relationship outside the context of Horace's work. In his reading, Mercury is something of a patron deity and not an analogue for Horace's actual writing process. Le Blanc, however, looks to the representation of Hermes as a metaphor for the process of translation. At the core of Le Blanc's argument is *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, a seventh century BCE ancient Greek hymn, in which Hermes surrenders the authority of poetry to Apollo. In his reading, Hermes' role as intermediary leaves him "imprisoned by the *content* of the message, which leaves him no freedom.[91] The translator, like Hermes, chafes in their role as intermediary and longs for the freedom that they ceded when they abandoned their own poetic endeavors.

While scholars have gestured towards the implications of Mercury's extradiegetic qualities, none have explored the ways in which these same attributes converge in the discourse of authorship. To make the leap from epic trickster and mouthpiece to author in his own right, my dissertation interfaces with questions of space and extradiegetic intervention. Although Le Blanc's analysis is similar to my approach, I argue for the opposite position. Ultimately, my aim is to refute Le Blanc's claim that Hermes allegorizes Harold Bloom's theory about the anxiety of influence. Le Blanc's argument rests on an underlying assumption that an ideal form of

[90] S.J. Harrison, "Horace's Mercury and Mercurial Horace," in John F. Miller, and Jenny Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury*, (Oxford University Press, 2019): 171.

[91] Charles Le Blanc and Barbara Folkart, *The Hermes Complex: Philosophical Reflections on Translation*, (University of Ottawa Press, 2012): 15.

authorship underpins all literary production in order for the Hermes figure to surrender that ideal to Apollo. However, it is my belief that an ideal originary state of authorship does not in fact exist. It is my contention that Hermes/Mercury alone among all the gods, as the perennial trickster, recognizes that there is no originary state to relinquish because he can see more than the binary.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 1, "The Oscillating God of Archaic Greek *Epos,"* I argue that Hermes emerges as the true god of archaic epic and that the oscillation between his role as Apolline herald and Dionysiac trickster directs the epic diegesis. In my analysis of Hermes' appearances in the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, I demonstrate that the messenger god's ability to oscillate between seemingly oppositional roles as both the god of communication and the god of lies mirrors the epic's delicate balance of closure and catastrophe. I align the function of the herald from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* with Apolline speech, a mode of expression that embodies the beauty and order of traditional mimetic forms. Apolline speech is the artistic register of semblance, rationality, dream, and form. The Apolline herald of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* maintains the social and cosmological order. While Hermes is given license to improvise when delivering Zeus' directives, he is nevertheless a faithful intermediary and lies play no part in the motivational speech that Hermes delivers. The herald's use of deception is temporary, thinly veiled, and immediately resolved. Similarly, I associate the trickster of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* with Dionysiac speech, a mode of expression that opposes the rational semblance of the Apolline with the chaotic blurring of boundaries. Dionysiac speech is the register of appetite, revelry, song, and intoxication. In the performance of one or the other role, there is no

transformation or metamorphosis of one kind of speech into the other. Only a temporary impression or shadow of the opposing role remains to mark its absence. In other words, the oppositional speech is legible only in the gap or omission left by the other speech at any one time. Because the archaic Greek *epos* is in a constant state of flux, Hermes' unique offices as both the god of lies and communication confer onto him the ultimate direction of the epic narrative. As a consequence, the cyclicality and iterability of the epic form is owed to the fact that all resolution facilitated by Hermes is temporary and illusory.

In Chapter 2, "Mediating Stasis in Mercury's *nusquam*," I demonstrate that the prevention of narrative stasis in the *Aeneid* relies upon Mercury's imposition of the lie in the paratextual space of the dream, which I call the *nusquam* ("nowhere"). Mercury, as the representative of the cosmological authority, initially fails to accomplish his mission of facilitating Aeneas' journey to Italy so long as he inhabits the Apolline role of the Homeric herald. By considering his various interventions through the lens of the Apolline/Dionysiac dichotomy, I demonstrate that a series of Mercury's failures in the first half of the *Aeneid* is due to his inability to oscillate successfully between his trickster and herald roles. In his first intervention in *Aeneid* 1, despite appearances to the contrary, Mercury's first task to open the lands of Carthage to the Trojan refugees only further entrenches Aeneas in North Africa. In his first intervention, Mercury attempts to solve an affective and Dionysiac task as the Apolline herald in a clandestine and wordless manner, and the incongruity of the role to the directive ends up jeopardizing Jupiter's ultimate goal of creating the future Roman state. In his second intervention, Mercury attempts to rectify the failure of his first visit by interceding directly to deliver Jupiter's command that Aeneas set sail for Italy. Once again assuming the role of Homeric Apolline herald, Mercury, the god of rhetoric, fails to compel Aeneas to leave due to

the intrusion of his maternal lineage as a Titan in an episode concerned primarily for the patrilinear transference of authority. It is only in Mercury's third intervention in Aeneas' dream when the messenger is able to intervene successfully by misrepresenting the threat that Dido poses to Aeneas in a dream that transpires outside the bounds of the primary diegesis. Aeneas' dream of Mercury in *Aeneid* 4, a Vergilian innovation in Greco-Roman epic, resolves the god's malfunctioning offices by creating the paratextual space of the *nusquam*, free from Homeric precedent, where Mercury is able to oscillate between roles freely and continuously. Ultimately, successful intervention takes place in the *nusquam* governed by the Mercurial figure, because the conventions, traditions, and rules of the epic form do not apply there. To demonstrate how the *nusquam* works, I consider Karen Barad's theory about the void of quantum physics to show that the dream space constitutes a kind of void that is fundamentally queer insofar as it defies binaries and has no definite shape. In much the same way, the *nusquam* constitutes multiple potential outcomes simultaneously. Within the *nusquam*, the lie represents a viable alternative reading that is not incompatible with the diegesis and exists alongside it.

In Chapter 3, "The Three Headed Mercury: Locating Alterities in the *Inferno*'s Reception of Mercury", I consider how the reception of the Mercurial figure in Dante's *Inferno* resolves a longstanding problem with Dante's relationship to the literature of the ancient world. When Vergil leads Dante to the gates of the City of Dis in Canto 8, unnamed demons bar their path until a messenger from heaven (*da ciel messo In*.9.85) demands that the poets' path be unimpeded. I argue in Chapter 3 that the delay at the gates of Dis in Canto 9 does not stage a failure of Dante's classical antecedents, but a collision of competing models of Mercurial speech in the epic episode where three Mercurial outcomes authorize three different strains of authorial power simultaneously. A reevaluation of the heavenly messenger in Canto 9 as a Mercurial

figure demonstrates that the tension between Vergil and Dante is not the result of competing theological worldviews, nor is the appearance of the heavenly messenger a corrective Christian salve for a pagan failure. Once the messenger's intervention opens the *terra* ("land") by inscribing himself on the landscape, the text is no longer beholden to a single history or literary tradition because Dante and Vergil are able to rewrite or authorize new traditions in real time. This possibility explains how and why Odysseus' story in *Inferno* 26 conflicts with Homeric precedent inside of Dis. The future is not fixed in the epic diegesis and is subject to change. When the Mercurial figure intervenes, he creates a new vector or tradition that is not beholden to other traditions. The process by which this happens is not internalization, as many allegorical interpretations of the Canto argue because Mercury's speech becomes inscribed on the land itself as he unlocks the realm in an act of externalization. The unlocking of the underworld states in metaphor the process by which the Mercurial figure creates space for alternative voices and traditions. The three Mercurial figures who mobilize lies to create productive alternative traditions invert the failure of the three-headed Satan, whose deceptions only result in stasis in the concluding Books of the *Inferno*. The reception of the classical Mercurial figure here demonstrates how alterity functions in the epic space and explains Dante's relationship to the ancient past while also allowing him to authorize new traditions that do not necessarily contradict pre-existing ones

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CHAPTER ONE:

The Oscillating God of Archaic Greek *Epos*

Introduction

Despite his seemingly small role within the canon of Greco-Roman literature, an analysis of his interventions reveals that Hermes is the true god of the epic mode. As the arbiter and interpreter of fate in epic poetry, Hermes' role as both the trickster and the mouthpiece of the cosmological order reflects the oscillation between closure and catastrophe in the epic diegesis. The mouthpiece of the epic form is fractured in the epic mode because the genre itself is in a state of constant interruption/reinvention/reception, making Hermes' oscillating roles best suited to directing the trajectory of the epic diegesis when it is threatened by stasis.

A reconsideration of Nietzsche's Apolline and Dionysiac dichotomy provides a productive model for thinking through the differences between the two poles of Hermes' offices as his theory also seeks to describe the role of the arts in classical literature. The application of the Nietzschean dyad to the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes* demonstrates that the messenger god Hermes appears in either one of two oppositional manifestations, the Apolline herald and the Dionysiac trickster.[92] The Apolline herald, whose model of intervention characterizes the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, maintains the social and cosmological order. The herald's

[92] English translation of the Iliad and Odyssey come from A.S. Kline unless otherwise noted. Greek text of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* come from the Loeb Classical Library unless otherwise noted: Homer, *Odyssey, Volume I: Books 1-12, t*ranslated by A. T. Murray, revised by George E. Dimock., Loeb Classical Library 104, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), and Homer, *Iliad, Volume I: Books 1-12*, translated by A. T. Murray, revised by William F. Wyatt, Loeb Classical Library 170, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924). The Greek text and English translation of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* comes from Hugh G. Evelyn-White in Hesiod., and Homer, *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, and Homerica / with an English Translation by Hugh G. Evelyn-White*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982).

actions uphold and delineate boundaries according to his relationship to a mode of expression that embodies the beauty, order, and traditional mimetic forms. The Dionysiac trickster, on the other hand, is driven by pure appetite, whose speech is characterized by deception and the violent blurring of discrete categories or boundaries.

Absence is at the core of representations of Hermes in archaic Greek epos insofar as his multivalence is only perceptible through the gap or shadow cast by the activation of either the Apolline or Dionysiac manifestation of the messenger. In his epic representations, there is no transformation or metamorphosis of one kind of speech into the other possible for Hermes. Only the tension of a temporary absence remains to mark the shadow of the opposing speech. In other words, the oppositional speech is legible only in the gap or omission left by the other speech at any one time as Hermes' role oscillates between Apolline messenger and Dionysiac trickster. The gap that manifests between the roles explains why the epic project defies closure, since Hermes, the mechanism responsible for the facilitation of the plot, is a mobile lacuna. Hermes' presence reaffirms that the epic narrative is necessarily incomplete, and as a consequence, lacks a coherent lineage or transference of authority. A survey of extant archaic Greek *epos* reveals that the relationship between Zeus, the cosmological hegemon, and Hermes, the representation and delivery of Zeus' authority, is strained in the epic mode. However, the friction between power and its representation in the epic mode is not a problem that needs to be reconciled; the fragmentation of power through language is one of the primary features of the genre.

Overview of Hermes and his *timai* [duties, offices][93]

[93] English transliteration of τῑμή -ῆς, ἡ: A honor, esteem, deference, pl. honors, demonstrations of honor, privileges B dignity, lordship, honor, as attribute of gods or kings; sovereignty, royal prerogative; office, dignity, magistracy; one who holds office, authority. "τῑμή" in: The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek, edited by: Franco Montanari.

Hermes, the god, is neither a stable signifier to contemporary critics nor to the ancient worshippers of his various cults.[94] A brief overview of his titles and offices, or *timai*, underscores how difficult it is to make any kind of comprehensive survey of either his religious or literary functions. Hermes is simultaneously the patron of thieves and merchants. He is the inventor of music, but also the conductor of dreams (*Oneiropompus*) and souls (*Psychopompos*).[95] In the epic mode, he is most notably the spokesperson for the king of the gods, Zeus, however Hermes is also the Greek trickster figure and the god of lies. Hermes is the ultimate facilitator as the "greatest friend to men" (σοὶ γάρ τε μάλιστά γε φίλτατόν ἐστιν / ἀνδρὶ ἑταιρίσσαι *Il*.24.334-335), and he is "a master manipulator of both words and material objects."[96] He is one of the oldest gods in the Greek Pantheon, whose name appears in Bronze Age tablets from Pylos, Thebes, and Knossos as early as 1100 BCE,[97] though only one civic festival, Hermaia, is known to have been celebrated in his honor, despite the long history of his worship across the ancient Mediterranean.[98] Critics do not agree on the etymology of his name, nor the meaning of his most popular epithets.[99] It is unclear if the herm, the phallic stone which identified the extent of land borders in the ancient world, predates or derives from his civic cult.[100] As is the case with all literary analyses that touch on ancient cult practices, however tangentially, to speak of the god in

[94] Arlene Allan, *Hermes. Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2018): 1.

[95] For a more comprehensive list of epithets see Allan 2018, 6-7.

[96] Allan 2018, 1.

[97] Allan 2018, 5.

[98] Allan 2018, 14-15.

[99] Allan 2018, 5-7.

[100] Allan 2018, 7.

any one context is to suppress numerous cult practices and folk traditions at the same time. Whatever our scholastic interests in the representation of Hermes, we cannot forget that human beings worshiped the figure and developed their own relationship to the god through their lived experience and religious observance for generations. Therefore, the theonym (god-name) Hermes is nearly limitless in its valence. Any attempt to make a totalizing portrait of Hermes is doomed to fail given that Hermes' nature rejects discrete categorization. Hermes, as many contemporary critics remind us, is the god of transgression whose respect for the neat ordering of cosmological duty is non-existent.[101]

Just as it is important to remember that Hermes has a near limitless valence outside of a literary context, it is also necessary to reflect upon the fact that the extant corpus of Greek epic is a small fraction of what was written. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* belong to a larger epic cycle of poetry, which is "a more or less continuous account of mythological history from the beginning of the world to the end of the Heroic Age."[102] Most poems belonging to this cycle do not survive to the present day and all knowledge of the lost epics comes from summaries, commentaries, and citations.[103] Therefore, any analysis of Greek epic risks overstating its claims or oversimplifying a complex literary tradition. However, from what little information we can glean from the lost epic cycle, Hermes appears to fulfill the same heraldic function from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the

[101] "Of all the divinities of classical antiquity, the Greek Hermes (Mercury in his Roman alter ego) is the most versatile, enigmatic, complex, and ambiguous. The runt of the Olympian litter, he is the god of lies and tricks, yet is also kindly to mankind and a bringer of luck; his functions embrace both the marking of boundaries and their transgression," Jenny Strauss Clay and John F. Miller, *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury,* (Oxford, 2019): 1.

[102] Martin West, *The Epic Cycle: A Commentary on the Lost Troy Epics* (Oxford, 2013): 1.

[103] West 2013, 1-3.

lost *Cypria*.[104] According to the summaries of Proclus, Hermes leads the goddesses Aphrodite, Hera, and Athena to meet with Paris at Zeus' command.[105] Any other appearance of Hermes in the cycle remains speculative. Though the record is incomplete, we nevertheless must grapple with contradictory and competing representations of Hermes that appear in archaic Greek *epos*.

There is nothing novel about the seemingly contradictory valence of Hermes' *timai*.[106] It is not my suggestion that Hermes is unique because of his complex responsibilities. However, in the specific manifestation of his offices in the epic mode, his complication is uniquely problematic because of the narratological function of his appearance. The mechanical/narratological function is the root cause of a great deal of discomfort with his appearance in the epic text. Servius and Augustine give us our earliest clues in the commentary

[104] When the goddesses Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera quarrel over which of them is the most beautiful, Zeus orders Hermes to conduct them to Paris to render his judgement, West 2013, 75.

[105] Proclus' summary reads,

> Ζεὺς βουλεύεται μετὰ τῆς Θέμιδος1 περὶ τοῦ Τρωϊκοῦ πολέμου. παραγενομένη δὲ Ἔρις εὐωχουμένων τῶν θεῶν ἐν τοῖς Πηλέως γάμοις νεῖκος περὶ κάλλους ἐνίστησιν Ἀθηνᾶι, Ἥραι καὶ Ἀφροδίτηι· αἳ πρὸς Ἀλέξανδρον ἐν Ἴδηι κατὰ Διὸς προσταγὴν ὑφ᾽ Ἑρμοῦ πρὸς τὴν κρίσιν ἄγονται.
>
> ("Zeus confers with Themis about the Trojan War. As the gods are feasting at the wedding of Peleus, Strife appears and causes a dispute about beauty among Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite. On Zeus' instruction Hermes conducts them to Alexander on Ida for adjudication"),

Greek Epic Fragments: From the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC, edited and translated by Martin L. West. Loeb Classical Library 497, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003): 68-69.

[106] In H.S. Vernsnel's comprehensive examination of the complexities and potential contradictions of polytheism in the ancient Mediterranean, *Coping With the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*, (Brill, 2011) he reminds us that "In sum, there is no unity, there are unities, creating at a different level a new diversity, even a new type of 'potential chaos', that of the multiplicity of classifications, one challenging the other and unpleasantly disconcerting the modern observer. Is Greek polytheism kosmos or chaos? By now my answer will not come as a surprise. One conclusion that has become obvious is that the different local pantheons represent multiple frames of reference, contexts and perspectives, each of them serving to help create order in an otherwise confusing diversity. Endless ramification is just a reflex of the nature of polytheism" (146).

tradition of this discomfort in their dismissal of its importance.[107] Fundamentally, this Chapter is invested in the ways in which archaic Greek *epos* activates or suppresses one feature of Hermes' *timai* over another. Rather than treating Hermes' various functions holistically, my analysis considers the ways in which the various *timai* above inform or complicate representations of his primary function as a messenger in archaic Greek *epos*. To do this, I consider how epic poetry's treatment of Hermes imbues the god with a specific "literary substance" in the epic register that is distinct from his religious status. I follow Anna Bonifazi's articulation of literary substance, which she defines as the complex series of motifs that classify a figure in a given literary context.[108] In archaic Greek *epos*, the motifs that make Hermes legible to the audience include the following features. Hermes is young, marked by his winged shoes, and carries a magic wand, the caduceus.[109] He is the ultimate navigator of space as he glides from the heights of heaven to the depths of hell while bounding over mountains and seas.[110] He is the facilitator and helper (ἐριούνης *Il*.24.360), who conducts (διάκτορος) people and animals alike.[111] His command of speech is unmatched as the god of rhetoric, and he relates the commands of Zeus as the divine messenger. The preceding features reflect what both Parker and Allan affirm as the fundamental concerns for all of Hermes' *timai*: "transition / communication / exchange".[112] Therefore, for the

[107] See "Introduction" pages 21-27 for a detailed account of the late antique response to the Hermes/Mercury.

[108] Anna Bonifazi, *Homer's Versicolored Fabric: The Evocative Power of Ancient Greek Epic Word-making*, Hellenic Studies Series 50, (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2012): 24.

[109] E.L. Harrison, "Vergil's Mercury." *Vergilius*, supp. Vol. 2 "Vergilian Bimillenary Lectures," (1982): 16.

[110] Harrison 1982, 16.

[111] See R. Janko, "A Note on the Etymologies of Διάκτορος and Χρυσάορος," *Glotta*, vol. 56, no. 3/4, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (GmbH & Co. KG, 1978): 192.

[112] R. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens,* (Oxford, 2005): 391.

purposes of this Chapter, the name "Hermes" activates a series of roles unique to the god's literary function in epic poetry as first and foremost a youthful and winged messenger whose role is to facilitate or transform. However, a closer examination of the messenger from the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* through a Nietzschean lens challenges the relationship between transition, communication, and exchange as they relate to Hermes' literary substance in the epic mode.

Apolline and Dionysiac Speech

Nietzsche's Apolline and Dionysiac categories allow us to flesh out the scope of Hermes' literary substance due to the seemingly contradictory functions of his *timai* when he appears as either a trickster or herald in archaic Greek *epos*. While *The Birth of Tragedy* is inconsistent, messy, and typically read as a lesser work by Nietzschean scholars, nevertheless, the dyad at the heart of Nietzsche's analysis provides a productive framework for thinking through questions of genre and poetic expression in an ancient Greek context in that it attempts to sketch a kind of literary substance for Apollo and Dionysos.[113] The theory's consideration of mimetic expression in relation to gods of the arts, Apollo and Dionysos, provides a useful vocabulary for thinking

[113] Recent work on *The Birth of Tragedy* that attempts to apply mythmaking to the text speaks to its precarity as a coherent philosophical treatise. For further reading on this issue, see Melanie Shepherd, "Myth, perspective, and affirmation in Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy," in History of European Ideas, 44:5, (2018): 575-589, and Peter Poellner, 'Myth, Art, and Illusion in Nietzsche', in Myth and the Making of Modernity: The Problem of Grounding in Early Twentieth Century Literature, ed. Michael Bell and Peter Poellner (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998), 61–80. Additionally, Paul Raimond Daniels succinctly explains the problem of treating The Birth of Tragedy as work of genuine Classical scholarship: "*The Birth of Tragedy* lacked footnotes entirely, and proposed to rely on its readers' own aesthetic experiences to justify its exegesis of the Olympians as dream-like, or the rapturous poetry of Archilochus as being underpinned by a musical mood within a drunken slumber," "The Birth of Tragedy: Transfiguration through Art," Chapter, in *The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, edited by Tom Stern, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 147-172.

about their brother Hermes, who is himself also a god of the arts whose responsibilities overlap both of Nietzsche's poles and whose relationship to the arts is often overshadowed by Apollo.[114] The tension that characterizes Nietzsche's dyad applied to Hermes demonstrates that the speech of intervention is not monolithic but informed by a collision of competing impulses. It is essential to the study of epic to sort through the tension in order to make sense of the seemingly unnatural insertion of Hermes into the larger epic narrative and the simple terms of the Apolline/Dionysiac theory clearly maps the extreme valence of Hermes' offices as the god of liminality.

For the purposes of this Chapter, I make a distinction between the Apolline and Dionysiac drives and the kinds of artistic products that those drives make possible. For example, tragedy itself is not a drive, but a kind of speech that arises from the application of the drives as the "consummating synthesis of early Greek cultural forces."[115] In another example, the Apolline drive motivates a concern for the replication of images, but Nietzsche identifies epic poetry as a genre created through devotion to the Apolline drive.[116] To make the distinction between the drive and the product of the drive clear, I will refer to all literary production made through the Nietzschean drives as either Apolline or Dionysiac speech. Apolline speech is the artistic register

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[114] As S. J. Harrison reminds us, Horace's professed relationship to Mercury as "a poet protected by Mercury/Hermes, god of the lyre," has been the subject of some recent debate by Horatian scholars, "Horace's Mercury and Mercurial Horace," in John F. Miller, and Jenny Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury* (Oxford University Press, 2019): 159.

[115] Lawrence Hatab, "Apollo and Dionysus: Nietzschean Expressions of the Sacred," in *Nietzsche and the Gods*, edited by Weaver Santaniello, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001): 50.

[116] Nietzsche writes, "Both the sculptor and his relative, the epic poet, are lost in the pure contemplation of images…[he] is joyfully contented living in these images and in them alone, and never tires of contemplating lovingly even the minutest details of them, and whereas even the image of the wrathful Achilles is for him merely an image whose wrathful expression he enjoys with the dream-pleasure in semblance (so that he is protected by this mirror of semblance against merging and becoming one with his figures)" Friedrich Wilhelm, Raymond Geuss, and Ronald Speirs, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP 1999): 30-31.

of semblance, rationality, dream, and form, whereas Dionysiac speech is the register of sensation, appetite, revelry, song, and intoxication. In my application of these categories, I am more interested in categorizing types of expression along the Nietzschean binary than in the psychological implications of the theory of drives. The Apolline and Dionysiac binary represents a clear and useful system of categorization for thinking through problems of literary representations or literary substances, especially in the context of a figure as complex and contradictory as Hermes, whose status as a trickster and liar in a Dionysiac vein somehow makes him an appropriate messenger of the Apolline truth.

Nietzsche renders the conflict between Apollo and Dionysos as a struggle between diametrically opposed drives and different expressions of speech, but the simple dichotomy does not account for a figure whose offices rely upon both types of speech perpetually as Hermes embodies both formlessness and form depending on the needs of his given task. As we will see with representations of Hermes, the distinction between Apolline and Dionysiac speech is not always apparent. As tempting as it may be to label Hermes a wholly Dionysiac figure, it is clear from the epic record that the god defies even the instability of a Dionysiac figure since he operates as a mouthpiece for traditional representation, having founded the Apolline arts through the creation of the lyre in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*.[117]

The Hermes Complex

While using the language of Nietzsche's Apolline and Dionysiac drives, this Chapter also responds to Charles le Blanc's *Hermes Complex* and recent work on the *Homeric Hymn* to

[117] Hom.*Herm*.24-62.

Hermes that hierarchizes the relationship between Hermes and Apollo.[118] In many of these readings, Hermes fulfills the role of a disorganized and chaotic energy in opposition to Apollo, who represents stability and order. The struggle between the brothers in these readings only resolves when Hermes submits to Apollo and finds himself a place in the emergent Greek pantheon. In response to these readings, it typically follows that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which depict a later moment in the mythological history of the cosmos, present a domesticated Hermes, whose rebellious nature is secondary to his role as spokesperson for the cosmological hegemon, having received his *timai* from both Apollo and Zeus at the conclusion of the *Homeric Hymn*.[119] For example, Christopher Bungard sees the tension between Apollo and Hermes in the *Homeric Hymn* to be a reflection of two different "ways of approaching the world".[120] But Bungard replicates here the same tension that informs le Blanc's tension, which itself restages the same tension between the Apolline and Dionysiac poles. We will see that the tension is not just external, but an internal matter that complicates Hermes' ability to perform the basic functions of his *timai*. While I acknowledge that the conflict between Hermes and Apollo is potent, I reject the terms and the findings of many of these analyses. My goal in this Chapter is to combat the simple dichotomy between Hermes and Apollo as that of a battle against order and chaos. I will

[118] For two examples of conciliatory approaches see Judith Fletcher, "A Trickster's Oaths in the 'Homeric Hymn to Hermes,'" *The American Journal of Philology* 129, no. 1 (2008): 19–46 and Christopher Bungard, "Reconsidering Zeus' Order: The Reconciliation of Apollo and Hermes," *The Classical World* 105, no. 4 (2012): 443–69.

[119] According to Jenny Strauss Clay, The *Hymn to Hermes*, "sets out to convey the essential nature of the chosen divinity through a narrative of his words and deeds. Furthermore, it manifests the hymns' characteristic concern with the acquisition and (re)distribution of *limai* among the Olympians that leads to a permanent and irreversible reorganization of the divine cosmos. Finally, like the *Hymn to Apollo, Hermes* recounts the birth of a new god who at first appears to threaten the stability of the established pantheon but who ultimately accedes to his prerogatives and takes his destined place within the divine order," *The Politics of Olympus: Form and Meaning in the Major Homeric Hymns*, (Bristol Classical Press, 2006): 96.

[120] Bungard 2012, 443.

also demonstrate that the desire to allegorize Hermes' role in archaic epic or to fit his transgressiveness into a civilizing narrative is to suppress a vital function of his interventions.

This Chapter uses Charles le Blanc's *The Hermes Complex* (1965) as a starting point to think about the paradoxical nature of Hermes' *timai* as an internal conflict, but I refute his conclusion that the messenger god lives in the anxious shadow of his brother, Apollo. Le Blanc looks specifically at the tension between Hermes and Apollo as a metaphor for the problem of translation writ large. At the core of Le Blanc's argument is Hermes' apparent surrender of the poetic arts to Apollo at the end of *Hymn to Hermes*. In his reading, Hermes' role as intermediary forces him to be "imprisoned by the *content* of the message, which leaves him no freedom".[121] The translator, like Hermes, chafes in their role as intermediary and longs for the freedom that they ceded when they abandoned their own poetic endeavors. However, the anxiety at the root of le Blanc's argument is the result of an unsophisticated reading of the epic Hermes, who is not just the mouthpiece of Zeus. As Denis Feeney reminds us, it is Iris in the Greek epic who acts as the divine audio recorder, and it is Hermes who is allowed a great deal of freedom in the delivery of his messages.[122] Le Blanc's argument rests on an underlying assumption that an ideal form of authorship underpins all literary production for the Hermes figure to surrender that ideal to Apollo. To le Blanc, "the indiscriminate use of words dulls their edge. Words are cheapened through overuse," and therefore there are good and bad translational practices.[123] Ultimately, le Blanc argues that the act of translating does not expand the limits of language, "on the contrary,

[121] Charles Le Blanc and Barbara Folkart, *The Hermes Complex: Philosophical Reflections on Translation*, (University of Ottawa Press, 2012): 15.

[122] Denis Feeney, "Leaving Dido: The Appearance(s) of Mercury and the Motivations of Aeneas," *A Woman Scorn'd: Responses to the Dido Myth*, (Faber and Faber, 1998): 107.

[123] Le Blanc 2012, 14.

it makes the translator sense, and sometimes even suffer from, their harshness".[124] However, it is my position that an ideal originary state of authorship does not, in fact, exist, as translation is a productive enterprise.[125] It is my contention that Hermes recognizes that there is no originary state to relinquish because he can see more than the binary of content/form or message/messenger.

What is most important to my analysis from *The Hermes Complex* is that le Blanc confirms that there is a rift between the form and function of epic representations of Hermes, which I see as a conflict between his mediation of Apolline and Dionysiac speeches. While I do not agree that Hermes most deeply agonizes over being trapped in language, I do read the disconnect between roles as fundamental to the Hermes myth.[126] On the one hand, Hermes facilitates, but on the other hand he interrupts, seizes, and lies. To reckon with the tension that le Blanc identifies between Apollo and Hermes, I will use the language of Nietzsche's twin drives, the Apolline and Dionysiac, from *The Birth of Tragedy,* to show that the primary opposition at play within the representation of the Hermes of the *Homeric Hymn* is not between his brother and himself, but between his two-fold nature the epic mode. My intention is not to argue that Hermes cannot occupy two contradictory natures considering that his doubleness/multivalence is a feature and not a bug of his *timai*. It is less about leveraging one manifestation of his *timai* over

[124] Le Blanc 2012, 21.

[125] Here I echo the work of my advisor Zrinka Stahuljak who argues that the role of the intermediary, or fixer, is a complicated negotiation of more than words since fixers "are never just interpreters—- a function that they are often erroneously reduced to—- since their work encompasses the work of intermediation broadly conceived, as described above. Intermediation can in fact be defined as creating intelligibility. In the activities they exercise, the linguistic skill is the medium but not the end in itself. Fixers 'multifunctionality is the response to the multifaceted nature of situations of unintelligibility, whereby unintelligibility exceeds linguistic nonunderstanding," *Fixers: Agency, Translation, and the Early Global History of Literature*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2024):7.

[126] Le Blanc 2021, 21.

another or about reevaluating Hermes' relationship to liminality than it is about considering how the doubleness is suppressed in the epic register. Before I can unpack fully the implications of the disjointed messenger figure, it is first necessary to explore how the text of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and the *Homeric Hymn* categorize Hermes' interventions according to the Nietzschean dyad.

1. The Apolline Hermes

The divine messenger of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* represents and acts on behalf of the Apolline cosmological order with Zeus at the top of the Olympian hierarchy. In his capacity as a messenger in these texts, Hermes' first concern is the maintenance of the social and political orders on both heaven and earth at the behest of his father. His role as a faithful deliverer of information supersedes all other aspects of his *timai* in his brief appearances throughout the two epics. Even when deployed to deceive, Hermes' use of deception is temporary, thinly veiled, and immediately resolved. For example, Odysseus recognizes Hermes right away in *Odyssey* 10 and Hermes reveals himself to Priam in *Iliad* 24 after delivering the Trojan king to the Greek camps. Most crucially, lies and deceptive speech do not characterize Hermes' language in his capacity as a representative of Zeus. While he may improvise when relating information, he nonetheless delivers Zeus' directives without extensive emendation. First and foremost, Hermes as the divine messenger in the *Iliad* is a team player: "Il est son messager et il ne se révolte jamais contre lui. ("He is his (Zeus') messenger and he never revolts against him").[127] His interventions operate on two primary levels, the level of the diegesis and the level of the reception of text. When the trajectory of a character's story is threatened or when stasis/paralysis threatens to derail the

[127] Paul Wathelet, "Hermès chez Homère ou le dieu officieux," in S. Perceau and O. Szerwiniack, eds. *Polutropia: d'Homère à nos jours,* (Mélanges offerts à Danièle Aubriot. Paris, 2014): 43. All translations from French to English from Wathelet are my own.

audience's experience of the narrative, Hermes relieves the tension by applying the rule of order onto a situation that teeters on the verge of collapse by making the ruling cosmological order clear through his speech acts.

Maintenance of Social and Political Order: *Iliad*

The intervention of Hermes in *Iliad* 24 constitutes the imposition of the cosmological order to solve a narrative crisis. In *Iliad* 24, when the king of Troy, Priam, resolves to venture outside the walls of the city to beg Achilles for the return of Hector's body, Zeus mobilizes Hermes to safeguard Priam's journey. Priam's desire to bury his son by endangering himself threatens to destabilize the ruling family in Troy outside the bounds of the predetermined agreement of the gods. The untimely circumvention of the natural order of Greek culture is a theme of this episode as the elderly Priam outlives his son, tearing the fabric of the family apart in both personal and political ways, as Hector's death interrupts flow of primogeniture. What is at stake is nothing less than the stability of the cosmological order as Zeus rules in Book 15 that Troy is fated to fall, but only on his own terms and in his own time:

> τοῦ δὲ χολωσάμενος κτενεῖ Ἕκτορα δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.
> ἐκ τοῦ δ᾽ ἄν τοι ἔπειτα παλίωξιν παρὰ νηῶν
> αἰὲν ἐγὼ τεύχοιμι διαμπερὲς εἰς ὅ κ᾽ Ἀχαιοὶ
> Ἴλιον αἰπὺ ἕλοιεν Ἀθηναίης διὰ βουλάς.
>
> ("Then in revenge for Patroclus, noble Achilles will kill Hector. Thereafter I shall let the Trojans be driven steadily from the ships, remorselessly, until the Greeks, advised by Athene, take Troy" *Il.*15.68-71).

Importantly, the language of his decree marries the physical seizure of Troy by the Greeks, ἕλοιεν ("they will seize"), with the conceptual βουλάς ("counsel") of Athena at *Il.*15.7. Zeus' decree shows how the destruction of Troy is a synthesis of concept and execution or deed and word. But the collapse comes only at the behest of Zeus whose participation is punctuated with

the first person τεύχοιμι ("I shall let" or "I shall cause/bring about"). Hermes, at this time of crisis for the personal (Priam), political (Troy), and cosmological (Fates), offers a solution by embodying the deed (intervention) and word (decree) as a stand-in for the agency of Zeus when he facilitates the above prophecy in Book 24. Zeus commands,

> Ἑρμεία, σοὶ γάρ τε μάλιστά γε φίλτατόν ἐστιν
> ἀνδρὶ ἑταιρίσσαι, καί τ᾽ ἔκλυες ᾧ κ᾽ ἐθέλῃσθα,
> βάσκ᾽ ἴθι καὶ Πρίαμον κοίλας ἐπὶ νῆας Ἀχαιῶν
>
> ("You love to guide travelers, and give ear to whomever you wish, so go and escort Priam to the hollow ships of the Greeks" *Il*.24.334-336).

Here, Zeus stresses Hermes' role as an escort and guide and does not give the herald any message to relay.[128] There is no speech to relay because Hermes inhabits the word of Zeus bodily; his presence is enough to guarantee the execution of Zeus' plan. The message is clear from Book 15, all that remains is the manifestation of the word.

Hermes represents the proper relationship between father/son (Zeus/Hermes) as a counterpoint to the disruption of the natural order that pervades the entire Priam episode in *Iliad* 24. His intervention takes the form of a corrective gesture in a world turned upside down, where the elderly Priam outlives his son and heir Hector. The injustice done to Priam becomes apparent in the parallel between Priam and Zeus. Priam represents the paragon of fatherliness as he is compared to Jupiter when Hermes first addresses him as πάτερ ("father" *Il*.24.362) and later when he states that in carrying out his mission, he will protect Priam because φίλῳ δέ σε πατρὶ ἐΐσκω ("you are the very image of my own father" *Il*.24.371). Priam goes so far as to refer to Hermes as his τέκος ("child" *Il*.24.425). In the pathetic figure of Priam we see the potential outcome of the subversion of Zeus' decrees, which must be avoided at all costs to maintain the cosmological order. Hermes is best suited to the task of reestablishing order because he, as the

[128] Harrison 1982, 13.

young lover of mankind, temporarily fills the vacuum left by the death of Hector as a second dutiful son. The implication is that, should Priam fail, Zeus' authority would be forfeit by extension, and the conflict on earth would mirror the conflict in the heavens.

Hermes urges Priam onward to facilitate the advancement of the plot from the threat of political stagnation into a state of narrative closure by fulfilling his role as the διάκτορος ("the conductor/guide"). The importance of movement is highlighted by Hermes' first encounter with Priam when he asks a question about the king's spatial position: πῇ πάτερ ὦδ᾽ ἵππους τε καὶ ἡμιόνους ἰθύνεις / νύκτα δι᾽ ἀμβροσίην, ὅτε θ᾽ εὕδουσι βροτοὶ ἄλλοι; ("Father, where are you off to, with your mules and horses, through the sacred night, when ordinary mortals sleep?" *Il*.24.362-363). Priam ἰθύνεις ("guides, directs") in the present tense because the continuous aspect reflects that he is in a state of flux. The threat to his person is immediate, but has not yet been realized, though it is close-by as Hermes attests: οὐδὲ σύ γ᾽ ἔδεισας μένεα πνείοντας Ἀχαιούς, / οἵ τοι δυσμενέες καὶ ἀνάρσιοι ἐγγὺς ἔασι; ("Do you not fear the Greeks and their fury, an enemy without shame, close by?" *Il*.24.364-365). Nevertheless, there is still time for Hermes to redirect the danger by taking charge of Priam's physical trajectory. In the reorientation of Priam, Hermes allows for some measure of closure for the audience at the conclusion of the epic narrative that itself is only one piece of the larger epic cycle.

Hermes' intervention does not just facilitate Priam's journey, it also addresses multiple crises within *Iliad* 24 including the unresolved burial of Hector, the interruption of primogeniture, and the narrative delay/stasis. Though Priam is fated to die, the temporary alleviation of the loss of his son through the substitution for Hermes allows the narrative of the epic poem to resolve, if not the Trojan war itself. Hermes' intervention temporarily stabilizes the impending collapse of Troy and demonstrates the insoluble link between mortal actions and the

health of the heavens by making a linguistic connection between an earthly political crisis and a heavenly crisis in the presentation of the father/son dichotomy and the orientation of Priam's trajectory. In this way, Hermes' physical intervention mobilizes Apolline speech to resolve a political crisis. Priam and Hermes make text, through their speech acts, the tacit cultural and political beliefs that underpin the stability of the universe through the presentation of proper hierarchies of power (son to father, subject to king, mortal to god). Through Hermes, Priam is able to make sense of the senseless behavior of Achilles to deny the regulation of hegemonic power dynamics in keeping Hector's unburied body from the prince's father.

Maintenance of Social and Political Order: *Odyssey*

In the *Odyssey*, Hermes reasserts the cosmological and social order onto Calypso's island, which stands far away from both the worlds of gods and humans.[129] Hermes delivers the semblance of a social script to the wilderness of Calypso's island when he frees Odysseus from Calypso at the request of Zeus. The aberration at the heart of *Odyssey* 5 involves the potential dissolution of Odysseus' marriage, and by extension, the social order of Ithaca. Once again, Hermes penetrates a situation verging on collapse and reestablishes the rule of law. He does so

[129] Hermes travels far to meet Calypso on her island:

> τῷ ἴκελος πολέεσσιν ὀχήσατο κύμασιν Ἑρμῆς.
> ἀλλ᾽ ὅτε δὴ τὴν νῆσον ἀφίκετο τηλόθ᾽ ἐοῦσαν,
> ἔνθ᾽ ἐκ πόντου βὰς ἰοειδέος ἤπειρόνδε
> ἤιεν, ὄφρα μέγα σπέος ἵκετο, τῷ ἔνι νύμφη
> ναῖεν ἐυπλόκαμος: τὴν δ᾽ ἔνδοθι τέτμεν ἐοῦσαν.
>
> ("So Hermes travelled over the endless breakers, until he reached the distant isle, then leaving the violet sea he crossed the land, and came to the vast cave where the nymph of the lovely tresses lived, and found her at home" *Od*.5.55-58).

for no personal benefit and against his will.[130] When Hermes encounters Calypso on her island, he states,

> Ζεὺς ἐμέ γ᾽ ἠνώγει δεῦρ᾽ ἐλθέμεν οὐκ ἐθέλοντα:
> τίς δ᾽ ἂν ἑκὼν τοσσόνδε διαδράμοι ἁλμυρὸν ὕδωρ
> ἄσπετον; οὐδέ τις ἄγχι βροτῶν πόλις, οἵ τε θεοῖσιν
> ἱερά τε ῥέζουσι καὶ ἐξαίτους ἑκατόμβας.
>
> ("Zeus it was who sent me, unwillingly. Who would choose to fly over the vast space of the briny sea, unspeakably vast? And no cities about: no mortals to sacrifice to the gods, and make choice offerings" *Od*.5.99-102).

This remark is striking because it reveals that the satisfaction of sensory desire must be suppressed for the facilitation of the epic narrative. Hermes, as opposed to Iris, can express his frustration as an unwilling participant (ἐθέλοντα), but his desire does not supersede that of his father. Hermes must set aside his appetite in service of the status quo. This fact seemingly contradicts the swiftness with which he executes the directive from Zeus.[131] And the lack of motivation stands in sharp contrast to the ease of the task. The exchange between Calypso and Hermes is cordial. They break bread together at an idyllic outdoor table.[132]

> ὣς ἄρα φωνήσασα θεὰ παρέθηκε τράπεζαν
> ἀμβροσίης πλήσασα, κέρασσε δὲ νέκταρ ἐρυθρόν.
> αὐτὰρ ὁ πῖνε καὶ ἦσθε διάκτορος ἀργεϊφόντης.
> αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δείπνησε καὶ ἤραρε θυμὸν ἐδωδῇ,
> καὶ τότε δή μιν ἔπεσσιν ἀμειβόμενος προσέειπεν
>
> ("With this the goddess set ambrosia on a table in front of him, and mixed a bowl of red nectar. So the messenger-god, the slayer of Argus, ate and drank, and when he had dined to his heart's content, he replied to her question" *Od*.5.92-96).

[130] Hermes does not personally benefit from his visit to Calypso: Le voyage est sans profit car il n'y a pas de mortels qui offrent aux dieux des sacrifices et des hécatombes ("The journey is without profit because there are no mortals who offer sacrifices or hecatombs to the gods"), Wathelet 57, 2014.

[131] Wathelet 44, 2014.

[132] Le dialogue entre les deux immortels sera d'autant plus facile qu'il se fera sans témoin. ("The dialogue between the two immortals will be all the easier as it takes place without witnesses" Wathelet 56, 2014).

The ἀμβροσίης ("ambrosia") and νέκταρ ("nectar") serve as an interesting counterpoint to Hermes' statement about sacrifices in the dialogue that follows. The offerings available to him at Calypso's cave are not what he had hoped to receive in service of his father. The statement ἐπεὶ δείπνησε ἤραρε θυμὸν ἐδωδῇ (literally, "when he dined and was furnished with food to his heart's content") is difficult to read as anything other than ironic, retroactively, given his stated preference and the hyperbolic application of θυμὸν ("heartily") to contrast his somber disposition.[133]

Calypso demonstrates that there is functionally no difference between the will of Hermes and the will of Zeus in their conversation. From Calypso's perspective, the face-to-face encounter that necessitates the hosting of an honored relative becomes abstract and impersonal. The insistent agency/personhood of Hermes, who complains about his remuneration, disappears in her first words to the herald: σχέτλιοί ἐστε, θεοί, ζηλήμονες ἔξοχον ἄλλων ("You are cruel, you gods, and quickest to envy" *Od*.5.118). Calypso speaks not just to Hermes, nor to Zeus, but to the apparatus of Olympus, which demands that she sacrifice her personal happiness. Through Calypso's eyes, Hermes transforms into the physical embodiment of the cosmological hegemon with a single invective, σχέτλιοί ("cruel"). Calypso, despondent, acknowledges that there is no argument that can be lodged against the νόον ("mind" or "sense") of Zeus:

> ἀλλ᾽ ἐπεὶ οὔ πως ἔστι Διὸς νόον αἰγιόχοιο
> οὔτε παρεξελθεῖν ἄλλον θεὸν οὔθ᾽ ἁλιῶσαι,
> ἐρρέτω, εἴ μιν κεῖνος ἐποτρύνει καὶ ἀνώγει,
>
> ("But since no god can escape or deny the will of Zeus the aegis bearer, let him go, if Zeus so orders and commands it" *Od*.5.137-139).

[133] For more information on the difference between ambrosia, nectar, and ritual offerings, see Chapter 3 of Sarah Hitch, *King of Sacrifice: Ritual and Royal Authority in the Iliad, Hellenic Studies 25*, (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University Press, 2009).

The imprecatory force of the third person imperative, ἐρρέτω ("let him go,") reinforces the gulf between host and guest still further.[134] The order can be localized to Zeus, but the act of setting Odysseus free belongs to a larger and inescapable system with no single face. Zeus owns the thought in the genitive, but the blame lies with the νόον. Interestingly, during Calypso's "tantrum"[135] no threats are exchanged.[136] What emerges is grief and rage untethered. A bodily threat against Hermes here would be tantamount to threatening an essential nature of the universe. Though Calypso complains, she does not protest the loss of her human lover. The impossibility of the task and the unstoppable inertia of the request make any attempt to thwart Hermes laughably ineffectual.

In *Odyssey* 5, Hermes insists on making himself seen and heard, but Calypso refuses to engage Hermes on a one-to-one basis. Despite the ease of his task and the swiftness of its execution, Hermes nonetheless represents a disinterested party, whose participation in the liberation of Odysseus becomes secondary to the orientation of the epic hero's journey. The implication of his intervention is that there is only one grand design for the universe and Hermes is the executor of that plan. Hermes is the bridge between stasis and closure for Odysseus and that made possible only by taking control of his bodily trajectory.

Father Land-- Regulation of Social Order and Body through Speech

Hermes' recitation of the phrase, πατρίδα γαῖαν, temporarily links the tension of bodily orientation and the threat of the dissolution of the social order that characterizes Hermes'

[134] Alfred Heubeck, Stephanie West, J. B. Hainsworth, A Hoekstra, and Joseph Russo, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990): 268.

[135] Heubeck 1990, 264.

[136] Wathelet 60, 2014.

interventions in both *Iliad* 24 and *Odyssey* 5. Hermes assumes control of Odysseus' bodily trajectory when Calypso relinquishes the epic hero, thereby relieving any tension that the epic journey is insurmountable. There is only one direction and one outcome available to all concerned parties, as Hermes repeats Zeus' directive, ἀλλ᾽ ἔτι οἱ μοῖρ᾽ ἐστὶ φίλους τ᾽ ἰδέειν καὶ ἱκέσθαι / οἶκον ἐς ὑψόροφον καὶ ἐὴν ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν ("he is destined to see those friends again, and reach his vaulted house and his native isle" *Od*.5.114-115). The phrase πατρίδα γαῖαν is an interesting construction as it merges masculine/feminine and human/divine polarities.[137] As a destination, the phrase is an appropriate approximation of the divides in time and space that Odysseus and Hermes need to traverse in order to accomplish their respective tasks within the epic poem. While the phrase, πατρίδα γαῖαν, is a fairly common formulation in dactylic hexameter, there are some striking intertextual resonances.[138] When Achilles shares the prophecy that his mother Themis revealed to him before he set sail for Troy, he states, εἰ δέ κεν οἴκαδ' ἵκωμι φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν, / ὤλετό μοι κλέος ἐσθλόν ("but if I return to my dear native land my glorious fame is lost" *Il*.9.414-415). Later, when Priam asks for the return of his son's body from Achilles, he says,

> σὺ δὲ δέξαι ἄποινα
> πολλά, τά τοι φέρομεν: σὺ δὲ τῶνδ᾽ ἀπόναιο, καὶ ἔλθοις
> σὴν ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν
>
> ("Accept the ransom, the princely ransom, I bring. May you have joy of it, and return to your native land" *Il*.24.555-557).

[137] The patrilineal reference contrasts the metonymic reference to Gaia the Earth goddess: πατρίς, "1. of the father's, grandfather's, patria 2. fatherland country" and γαῖα, "Gaia, Earth" spouse of Uranus in: The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek.

[138] Searching the Loeb online database, the phrase appears in the accusative case 52 times throughout the *Odyssey*. Homer, *Odyssey, Volume I: Books 1-12,* translated by A. T. Murray, revised by George E. Dimock, Loeb Classical Library 104, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919).

In both instances, there is an anxiety tied to the fulfillment of predetermined outcomes and the natural order of either social or cosmological stability. Both statements, just as the one from *Odyssey* 5, speak to a fear of not achieving closure on a personal and public level. They describe moments during which the long form project of their respective epics succeeds or fails at the site of human bodies (Achilles', Hector's, and Odysseus'). It is not my position that the formula in the Odyssey is an allusion to the two Iliadic episodes, but that the formula is appropriate for situations fraught with tension about the ability to fulfill the dictates of fate precisely because of how the two words linguistically and thematically speak to oppositional dichotomies. That it is Hermes who speaks the line to Calypso is to reassure the audience that the seemingly impossible is only possible through the intervention of the herald who can best guide Odysseus to his goal. Hermes seizes control from ambiguity of the phrase through the imposition of Apolline language.

Deception in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

Deception, though nominally present, is half-hearted and uncovered almost as soon as it appears in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Only two of Hermes' actions in Homer could qualify as deceptive. The first instance occurs in *Iliad* 24 when Hermes appears to Priam as a Greek soldier and the second occurs in *Odyssey* 10 when Hermes, as a young man, provides the means by which Odysseus will escape from Circe's island. In both examples Hermes' disguise is hardly effective. In the *Iliad*, Hermes disguises himself as the young squire of Achilles, a form very close to his "real shape."[139] Though Priam suspects that Hermes is in fact a god, and when the king arrives safely at the Greek camp, Hermes confirms as much when he states, ὦ γέρον ἤτοι

[139] Jenny Strauss Clay, "Hide and Go Seek: Hermes in Homer," in John F. Miller, and Jenny Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury*, (Oxford University Press, 2019): 69.

ἐγὼ θεὸς ἄμβροτος εἰλήλουθα / Ἑρμείας: σοὶ γάρ με πατὴρ ἅμα πομπὸν ὄπασσεν ("venerable lord, my Father sent me to guide you on your way. You have been visited by an immortal god, for I am Hermes" *Od*.24.460-461). The revelation should come as no shock to the king, as Zeus had warned him previously, through Iris, that we would be escorted by Hermes for the journey to ransom Hector's body:

> μὴ δέ τί οἱ θάνατος μελέτω φρεσὶ μὴ δέ τι τάρβος:
> τοῖον γάρ οἱ πομπὸν ὀπάσσομεν ἀργεϊφόντην,
> ὃς ἄξει εἶός κεν ἄγων Ἀχιλῆϊ πελάσσῃ.
>
> ("Tell him not to fear death or anything else, for we will grant him the best of guides, Hermes, who will escort him to Achilles" *Od*.24.152-154).

It is no wonder that there is no *thambos* ("astonishment') that usually accompanies an epiphany given the warning Priam received and the unconvincing disguise.[140]

Likewise, Hermes appears as a young man in *Odyssey* 10 to deliver to Odysseus a magical herb (φάρμακον ἐσθλὸν *Od*.10.287) with which he can protect himself against Circe's power. Odysseus recognizes the young man as Hermes, regardless of disguise, in his recollection of events to the Phaeacians. According to Odysseus,

> ἔνθα μοι Ἑρμείας χρυσόρραπις ἀντεβόλησεν
> ἐρχομένῳ πρὸς δῶμα, νεηνίῃ ἀνδρὶ ἐοικώς,
> πρῶτον ὑπηνήτῃ, τοῦ περ χαριεστάτη ἥβη:
> ἕν τ᾽ ἄρα μοι φῦ χειρί, ἔπος τ᾽ ἔφατ᾽ ἔκ τ᾽ ὀνόμαζε:
>
> ("Hermes of the Golden Wand, in the likeness of a young man at that charming age when down first covers the cheeks, met me as I approached. He clasped me by the hand and spoke to me" *Od*.10.277-280).

Again, no epiphany characterizes the meeting of god and human due in large part to Odysseus' recognition of Hermes on both a visual and physical level. Hermes "seems" (ἐοικώς) like a man, so as to be near to, but not exactly a man to an outside observer, but touch confirms what

[140] Strauss Clay 2019, 68.

Odysseus' eyes suspect.[141] Hermes makes physical contact with Odysseus when he takes up the hero's hand, χειρί, and addresses him by name: ὀνόμαζε ("to name" or "to speak by name"). Later, in the recounting of the story, Odysseus does exactly the same by calling Hermes by name in his recollection of events when the god is supposedly in disguise. The correlatives in line 280, τ'… τ'… τ' reinforce the melding of the intellectual and experiential evidence of Hermes' presence. The elision of τε ("and") lends the line a breathless quality as enclitics and prepositions drive the mono or duo syllabic words headlong into the weighty four syllable ὀνόμαζε. The breathlessness speaks to the immediacy of the danger that necessitates the intimacy of physical contact. However, Hermes alleviates the danger as the line slows into the final two feet of the hexameter through his ability to name Odysseus and recognize him as wretched (δύστηνε *Od*.10.281). Hermes puts a name to the danger, recognizes the implications of Odysseus' struggle, and provides the necessary knowledge to combat the adversity of Circe's island. As a go-between and messenger, Hermes provides Odysseus with the physical means to defend himself, the magical herb, and the knowledge to weaponize the botanical, thereby bridging object and knowledge, word and deed, appearance and reality during an encounter in which Hermes nominally attempts to deceive.

The epithet Odysseus uses to describe Hermes in *Odyssey* 10, χαριεστάτη ("of the golden wand") is conspicuous insofar as the association of Hermes to his wand, which is not visible, serves to heighten Odysseus' disbelief that the man before him is anything other than the divine herald. Concern for wands in rampant in the scene as Hermes warns that Circe will threaten Odysseus with her περιμήκεϊ ῥάβδῳ ("long rod" *Od*.10.293), with which she has robbed his crew of their humanity by turning them into pigs. The transformation carries with it sexual

[141] Strauss Clay 2019, 70.

implications as the men lose their masculine shape at the touch of Circe's phallic wand (*Od*.10.238). Furthermore, Hermes warns that without his help, Circe threatens to leave Odysseus stripped bare and unmanned (ἀπογυμνωθέντα, ἀνήνορα *Od*.10.301). Ironically, Odysseus himself unmans Hermes in a more literal sense by stripping him of his disguise in the telling of his story. The repetition of wand imagery throughout Hermes' appearance in *Odyssey* 10 only calls attention to the missing caduceus.

Deception does not motivate those receiving Zeus' directives through Hermes. Hermes does not rely upon misrepresentation of imminent danger to provoke the receivers of his message into action. Rational appeals to obligations on a personal or cosmological level suffice to motivate willing and unwilling subjects of Zeus' will. Consider the lack of resistance that Hermes meets in his interventions. Priam doubts the form of his guide, but not the content of his message. Calypso laments the impending loss of Odysseus but does not offer a rebuttal to the logic of Hermes' representation of Zeus' will. Her rage, though palpable, has no clear target. The familiarity and ease with which Odysseus converses with Hermes is exceptional as other scholars have observed, and it is no coincidence that the herald's disguise proves ineffectual at this crucial juncture in the narrative when the stakes are so high.[142] Though Hermes goes through the motions of the epiphany when he reveals himself to Odysseus, he nonetheless makes little attempt to deceive the hero. In other words, Hermes maintains the form of the epiphany but sidelines its function. Though this may be the result of Hermes' close affinity to mortals, it is telling that the impulse to deceive is half-hearted and untenable in the context of Hermes as guide/helper. The physical manifestation of the herald does not deviate from Hermes' essential

[142] Odysseus' special relationship to Hermes is due in part to their familial bond and their status as tricksters. For a comprehensive comparison between the god and the hero, see Thomas Van Nortwick, "The Ward of Hermes: Odysseus as Trickster," in *The Unknown Odysseus: Alternate Worlds in Homer's Odyssey*, (University of Michigan Press, 2009): 83-97.

physical characteristics, as if the perennial trickster is incapable of deviating from the truth when employed in the service of it.

What emerges from a consideration of Hermes' performance of his duties in the Iliad and Odyssey is that he is reliable. While he may improvise, nonetheless he is a faithful deliverer of information. All deception on the part of the herald is visual, and as we have seen, the effectiveness of his disguise is superficial. When it comes to the delivery of Zeus' message or the execution of his directives, Hermes is true to the letter and spirit of his mission. Improvisation is possible but limited. What emerges from the various patterns above is that Hermes as the Homeric herald upholds Apolline speech at the expense of his trickster nature.

2. The Dionysiac Hermes

In contrast to the stalwart Apolline figure of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Hermes of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* is characterized by Dionysiac speech. The one-day-old Hermes is driven by pure appetite whose tastes for food and erotic love are incongruous with his age and status. Appropriately, the baby Hermes is also incapable of distinguishing between discrete categories and his behavior disregards the difference between his own and other people's possessions. Hermes confuses victims with honorees and, unsurprisingly, he has little regard for the truth. As opposed to the Apolline messenger of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Hermes in the *Hymn* relieves the threat of violence not with rhetoric, but with song and bodily excretions. Many scholars have argued that the trickster impulses that inform Hermes' Dionysiac speech are a marker of the god's juvenile state. These readings rely upon an interpretation that Hermes capitulates to Apollo at the conclusion of the poem. However, as we shall see, the ending is far more complicated than this. Even if the *Hymn to Hermes* provides an aetiological explanation for

Hermes' fittedness to his various offices, the poem's conclusion reveals that closure is fleeting in the exchange of gifts between Hermes and Apollo since Hermes does not actually surrender the poetic arts when he gifts his brother the lyre, an invention of his own making.

In pursuit of his great appetite for earthly and sensory experience, Hermes disregards the boundary between the truth and lies. This is crucial to our understanding of the poem because Hermes' rhetorical strategies serve as the primary manifestation of the problem as direct discourse makes up a little less than half of the poem's 581 lines. Most of that dialogue is broken up into four distinct episodes: Hermes' speech to his mother Maia (155-181); Apollo's accusation against Hermes and his initial denial (254-292); the "trial" of Hermes before Zeus (330-386); and the exchange of *timai* between Apollo and Hermes (436-495; 526-568).[143] In terms of patterning, Athanassios Vergados accurately remarks that "these confrontations are arranged in an ascending order (Maia, Apollo, and Zeus)," and therefore the *Hymn* implies that Hermes grows more capable at handling speech as the poem progresses.[144] However, the sort of speech on display in the *Hymn* is not the Apolline speech that marks the Hermes of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Rather than subsuming or aligning the Dionysiac impulses of the trickster to the Apolline messenger at the end of the poem, the *Hymn* actively suppresses the tradition of Hermes as the spokesperson for the cosmological hegemon. As a result, the *Hymn* positions Hermes as the ultimate Dionysiac trickster, whose deceptive speech operates in opposition to the Apolline power structure of Olympos.

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[143] According to Nicholas Richardson, "Hermes cattle-theft leads to a kind of lawsuit between him and his brother, culminating in a mock-trial on Olympus," *Three Homeric Hymns: To Apollo, Hermes, and Aphrodite. Hymns 3, 4, and 5, Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics*, (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 21.

[144] Athanassios Vergados, *The "Homeric Hymn to Hermes": Introduction, Text and Commentary*, (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013): 358.

Dionysiac Appetite

The child Hermes of the *Homeric Hymn* embodies pure appetite. After engaging in a secret tryst with Zeus, the nymph Maia gives birth to Hermes in a cave away from the prying eyes of mortals and gods. But, as the proem states, Hermes would not sit still in his cradle. His first impulse is to covet and seize as he is οὐκέτι δηρὸν ἔκειτο μένων ("unable to sit and wait"), and ζήτει ("searches after") Apollo's cattle.[145] Following the proem (lines 1-20), the main body of the narration begins with a child's first steps into the wider world:

> ὃς καὶ ἐπεὶ δὴ μητρὸς ἀπ' ἀθανάτων θόρε γυίων
> οὐκέτι δηρὸν ἔκειτο μένων ἱερῶι ἐνὶ λίκνωι,
> ἀλλ' ὅ γ' ἀναΐξας ζήτει βόας Ἀπόλλωνος
> οὐδὸν ὑπερβαίνων ὑψηρεφέος ἄντροιο
>
> ("He indeed, when he had jumped from his mother's
> immortal limbs, did not then stay and lie for long in his sacred
> winnowing-fan cradle: he rather leapt up and began to seek
> Apollo's cows, stepping over the threshold of the high-roofed
> cave" Hom.*Herm*.21-23).

However, these steps are transgressive for multiple reasons. He asserts a freedom of movement that is incompatible with his infant status by leaving behind the very markers of his infancy, his mother's embrace and his cradle, in favor of mischief. The rejection of his constraints, λίκνωι ("open wicker-work basket or crib"), casts Hermes as a selfish creature even before he violates social custom and the respect for Apollo's property later in the poem.[146] His movements are violent as he leaps (θόρε) and springs (ἀναΐξας) before he demonstrates that he can walk. The insistence of the genitive case in this short passage (μητρὸς, ἀθανάτων…γυίων, Ἀπόλλωνος,

[145] Hom.*Herm*.21-22.

[146] Oliver Thomas, ed. *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, of *Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 151-152.

ὑψηρεφέος ἄντροιο) establishes from the onset that the hymn will test the limits of possession as Hermes violates the boundaries established by other gods and objects. It is desire that compels Hermes to cross his first threshold (οὐδὸν), and it will continue to mark his relationships to people and object as the *Hymn* progresses.

Hermes' primary motivation is to seek out cattle, but having had no experience of the world outside the cave, how does he know what cattle are? Scholars have thoroughly cataloged the ridiculousness of Hermes' desire and have pointed out that the incongruity operates on primarily two levels.[147] Firstly, Hermes is a god and does not eat meat. Secondly, babies require milk and not food, as Hermes reminds Apollo later, ὕπνος ἐμοί γε μέμηλε καὶ ἠμετέρης γάλα μητρός ("sleep is my concern, and my mother's milk" Hom.*Herm*.267). His desire is uninformed by personal experience or knowledge, and it is inappropriate to his apparent age and status. There is no outside stimulus or explanation available in the text to suggest an external source of motivation to seize the cattle. Then from where does it originate if not from his very nature? Knowledge of the object of his desire remains second to the desire itself, revealing that Hermes' impulse to consume is inherent and will operate as his foremost drive throughout the poem.

Hermes' seemingly incongruous desire paints an interesting picture of his characteristic inventiveness as the ability to shape reality to his imagination, untethered to experiential or intellectual knowledge. When exiting the cave on his search for Apollo's cattle, Hermes encounters a tortoise: ἔνθα χέλυν εὑρὼν ἐκτήσατο μυρίον ὄλβον· / Ἑρμῆς τοι πρώτιστα χέλυν τεκτήνατ' ἀοιδόν ("There, he found a tortoise, and gained immeasurable prosperity: yes, Hermes first engineered a tortoise to be a singer" Hom.*Herm*.24-25). That Hermes delays the seizure of Apollo's cattle in favor of inventing the lyre first does not represent a distraction from his initial

[147] See H.S. Vernsnel, "Why is Hermes Hungry?" in *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology*, (Brill, 2011): 308-374.

goal, as some have argued.[148] The creation of the lyre and the cattle theft speak to the same preoccupation as the impulse to do both derives from the same source. In the following simile, Hermes is motivated to create the lyre in a similar fashion to an anxious human being plagued with worries:

> ὡς δ' ὁπότ' ὠκὺ νόημα διὰ στέρνοιο περήσει
> ἀνέρος ὅν τε θαμειναὶ ἐπιστρωφῶσι μέριμναι,
> ἠ' ὅτε δινηθῶσιν ἀπ' ὀφθαλμῶν ἀμαρυγαί,
> ὣς ἅμ' ἔπος τε καὶ ἔργον ἐμήδετο κύδιμος Ἑρμῆς
>
> ("As when a swift thought crosses into the chest of a man in whom a throng of worries roam, or when twinkling glances are whirled from eyes, so glorious Hermes contrived both speech and deed together" Hom.*Herm*.43-46).

Note the enjambment of the first two lines in the simile. The displacement of the man (ἀνέρος) to the first position of the second line severs the thought from the owner of the thought and visually affirms the ways in which anxiety multiplies worry through division.[149] Importantly, Hermes is not directly compared to the unnamed man, but to the swift thought (ὠκὺ νόημα) that plagues him. Combining the delayed genitive with the transferred epithet plants the emphasis of the simile firmly on the act and not on the actor. Hermes is not just a man (though the simile heavily implies a kinship to humanity), he is the pain-bearing impetus caught between action and the representation or the semblance of that action when multiple concerns or possible paths (in the case of the whirling glances) present themselves. It is jarring, then, that Hermes merges word and deed (ἔπος τε καὶ ἔργον) to invent the lyre from the carcass of the tortoise by transforming the worried thought and the word/semblance/representation of the idea into a concrete/physical/earthly object. It is thought itself, abstracted and divorced from a specific

[148] For more information about the order of events in other etiologies of Hermes, see Susan Shelmerdine, "Hermes and the Tortoise: A Prelude to Cult," in *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 25 (1984): 201-208.

[149] Thomas 167, 2020.

context that compels Hermes, much like the desire that compels him to seek out Apollo's cattle. For the hymnic Hermes, word and deed come together in a vacuum originating from pure appetite and desire.

Hermes' relationship to ownership and theft reveals his understanding that what makes a god is not necessarily the ability but the desire to consume. When Maia confronts Hermes about his exploits beyond her cave, "he threatens even worse exploits of burglary."[150] After claiming to his mother that he is no τέκνον / νήπιον ("feeble child" Hom.*Herm*.163-164), he summarizes his intentions with the following statement:

> αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ τέχνης ἐπιβήσομαι ἥ τις ἀρίστη,
> βουκολέων ἐμὲ καὶ σὲ διαμπερές. οὐδὲ θεοῖσιν
> νῶϊ μετ' ἀθανάτοισιν ἀδώρητοι καὶ ἄπαστοι
> αὐτοῦ τῆιδε μένοντες ἀνεξόμεθ', ὡς σὺ κελεύεις
>
> ("I shall embark on whatever skill is best, tending to you and me continually. Nor will we two among the immortal gods endure without gifts or food, just staying here as you urge" Hom.*Herm*.166-169).

Once again, it is appetite unmoored to status or experience that compels Hermes' theft, as he equates the high standing of the gods to their ability to consume above all else. What distinguishes his current state as one of the ἀδώρητοι ("receiving no gifts") and that of the honored gods is their access to food, as he and his mother languish ἄπαστοι ("not having eaten"). The present participle βουκολέων here encapsulates Hermes' position perfectly in that it both means "to tend cattle" (and by extension "to tend" in a general sense) and "to delude" or "to deceive."[151] While the grammar of the sentence does not support a reading of the second sense, nevertheless, the relationship between the two ideas remains.[152] To Hermes, care for himself and

[150] Richardson 2010, 18.

[151] Thomas 2020, 240.

[152] Thomas 2020, 240.

his mother is ironically akin to the feeding of cattle through the deceitful acquisition of cattle. Not only does Hermes not respect the bounds of ownership, but his language does also not allow for a distinction between trending to or slaughtering cattle.

Hermes cannot conceive of receiving honors differently than his brother, Apollo, despite not being recognized among the pantheon in the first place and threatens violence to achieve his goals. Having been born in secret to a goddess who μακάρων δὲ θεῶν ἠλεύαθ' ὅμιλον ("was bashful, and avoided the throng of blessed gods" Hom.*Herm*.5), he is either incapable or unwilling to acknowledge the precarious position in which he finds himself. From Hermes' perspective, no offering or honor is too great for the unacknowledged day-old child of Zeus. As a consequence, Hermes considers multiple avenues by which he may acquire his divine rights by τέχνης ("skill"), including violence when he threatens to plunder (ἀντιτορήσων) the riches of Delphi, his brother Apollo's sacred city, if necessary.[153] Here the impulse to consume transforms desire into destruction as the limits of other people's belongings and honors cannot contain his hunger.

In this figure of Hermes, there is a disconnect between his appearance as a child and the miraculous and instantaneous development of his cognitive functions as soon as he is born. This unnerving combination results in a paradoxical figure, who is either too young to know better and must somehow come of age throughout the course of the poem or is a fully developed being who merely presents as a child in need of guidance. Ultimately, the implications of the resolution of the poem and the exchange of *timai* must be understood through this paradox. Does Hermes experience a kind of personal growth, or does he merely appear to mature in pursuit of his goal to receive divine prerogative? The lack of an obvious answer to the question reflects Hermes'

[153] Hom.*Herm*.178-181.

Dionysiac status. Hermes' appetite offers a clue to help resolve the paradox insofar as his appetite is not for beef or riches, but for the violation of boundaries. His hunger does not dissipate by the end of the poem, it simply transforms.

Erotic Love

The inspiration for the creation of the poetic arts is carnal pleasure fueled by a desire for the experience of sensory stimulation. This desire for the stimulation of the physical body is seemingly incompatible with Hermes' status as a god, but it is this very same incongruity that informs Hermes' invention of the lyre following his departure from the cave. Once over the threshold of his mother's cave, Hermes encounters a χέλυν ("tortoise" Hom.*Herm*.25) who he will transform into an ἀοιδόν ("singer") after ritualistically killing it and using its body as the base for a lyre. Upon meeting the tortoise, Hermes remarks,

> σύμβολον ἤδη μοι μέγ' ὀνήσιμον· οὐκ ὀνοτάζω.
> χαῖρε, φυὴν ἐρόεσσα, χοροιτύπε, δαιτὸς ἑταίρη,
> ἀσπασίη προφανεῖσα. πόθεν τόδε καλὸν ἄθυρμα
>
> ("A sign already – and a very beneficial one for me! I don't disparage it. Joy to you, gorgeous-bodied girl who stamps in the chorus, companion of the feast, a welcome appearance. Where's this pretty plaything from?" Hom.*Herm*.30-32).

As Thomas points out, the use of χοροιτύπε ("girl who stamps in the chorus") evokes the sense of song and dance that will accompany the tortoise after it is transformed into an instrument. Here, Hermes sexualizes the object of his attention by confusing the tortoise for a lover as "the other sense of ἑταίρη, 'courtesan', cannot be suppressed since the tortoise has just been sexualized."[154] When Hermes does construct the lyre, the subject of his first song, indeed the subject of the first song ever sung, is erotic love. Specifically, Hermes sings about the love affair

[154] Thomas 2020, 159-160.

of Zeus and his mother, the fair-shod Maia (Μαιάδα καλλιπέδιλον) and then honors (ἐγέραιρε) her female attendants (ἀμφιπόλους).[155] Just as the listener is left wondering how or why Hermes is compelled to seek out cattle, they must also consider Hermes' familiarity with the tropes of erotic poetry. The concern for erotic love and knowledge of his mother's affair is incongruous with the shape, appearance, and function of Hermes' immature body. Hermes' physical immaturity is a constant motif throughout the hymn. The elderly witness of Hermes' theft identifies the trickster as a παῖς ("child") not once, but twice when recounting the events to Apollo (Hom.*Herm*.208-209). When Apollo confronts Hermes, he is back in his crib, swaddled as a small child (παῖδ' ὀλίγον Hom.*Herm*.245). Apollo addresses him as a child multiple times.[156] His appearance and age are the primary bits of evidence Hermes uses to proclaim his innocence of the cattle theft.[157] The insistence of Hermes' immaturity again begs a similar question that I asked above: how does he know the circumstances of his birth and how is he familiar with erotic language?

Hermes' affinity for erotic subject matter, despite his sexual immaturity, arises from the same overwhelming desire for the flesh of the cattle. Having satisfied his desire for song, he returns his attention to Apollo' cattle as he leaves his cave κρειῶν ἐρατίζων ("lusting after meat" Hom.*Herm*.64). Note the use of ἐρατίζω, the epic version of ἐράω, which also connotes love in an erotic sense.[158] Hermes butchers Apollo's cattle, but he cannot (and by the end of the hymn will not) eat the flesh that he prepares. The store of nektar and ambrosia in Maia's cave, which

[155] This sequence occupies Hom.*Herm*.57-64.

[156] At Hom.*Herm*.254, 334, and 557.

[157] See Hom.*Herm*.261-277.

[158] ἐράω: to love, desire (ardently) in: *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek,* edited by: Franco Montanari.

Apollo uncovers in his quest for the cattle, suggests that Hermes is on a more traditional godly diet after all.[159] The parallel between his unfulfilled erotic preoccupation and his hunger speaks to a tension of being unable to fully satisfy his desires. Incongruity informs the primary points of tension in the hymn in his clash with Apollo and Zeus over the misapplication of his abilities at the end of the poem. Untethered to experience or knowledge, Hermes embodies desire itself throughout the hymn and it will be that same desire that wins him a place on the Olympian pantheon. While the incongruity of his desires and his needs humanizes the child god, it is impossible to ignore how his base emotional impulses situate the trickster firmly in a Dionysiac register.[160] Hermes possesses a connection to the earth that will make him an appropriate intermediary between the heavens and the earth, but the Olympian dependability that will characterize his role as spokesperson of Olympus is missing. Hermes does not demonstrate in the hymn his fittedness to anything but the earth and earthly concerns.[161] The sexualization of the tortoise blurs companionship, erotic love, and sacrifice. The tortoise is simultaneously a victim and a subject of honor, a plaything and a lover. The instability of the tortoise as a symbol typifies Hermes' relationship to discrete categories moving forward.

Deceptive Speech Acts in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*

[159] τρεῖς ἀδύτους ἀνέῳγε λαβὼν κληῖδα φαεινὴν / νέκταρος ἐμπλείους ἠδ᾽ ἀμβροσίης ἐρατεινῆς: ("He peered in every corner of the great dwelling and, taking a bright key, he opened three closets full of nectar and lovely ambrosia"), Hom.*Herm*.247-248.

[160] For in depth analyses of Hermes' human characteristics see D. Jaillard, *Configurations d'Hermès. Une "théogonie hermaïque,"* (Kernos Suppl. 17, Liège 2007), Vernsel 2011, 319-327, and Thomas 154, 2020.

[161] *En somme, les diverses fonctions d'Hermès s'expliquent bien par son lien avec la Terre, qui intervient peut-être dans l'étymologie de son nom : il en possède la richesse, et spécialement les troupeaux* ("In short, the various functions of Hermes are well explained by his link with the Earth, which is perhaps involved in the etymology of his name: he owns its wealth, and especially the herds"), Wathelet 2014, 53.

However amusing Zeus or Apollo may find his lies, Hermes is nevertheless unsuccessful in deceiving either god with his speech, despite his increasing rhetorical capabilities. And yet Hermes cannot deviate from the same strategy as he is locked in a perpetual Dionysiac cycle of deceptive speech throughout the poem, even when given an opportunity to activate other aspects of his *timai*. Hermes' rejection of his brother's speech is most clearly demonstrated on the journey to Olympos, even before either is able to stage their oppositional rhetorical strategies against one another before Zeus. As Apollo begins his journey to Olympos with Hermes, the young god's non-verbal response to being held repels Apollo and confirms the impossibility of reconciliation in their inability to make physical contact, even temporarily.

Hermes is incapable of telling the truth, even when confronted with irrefutable evidence to the contrary. When Apollo tracks the thief of his cattle to Maia's cave, he threatens to upend the cosmos in retaliation by casting Hermes into Tartarus:

> ὦ παῖ, ὃς ἐν λίκνωι κατάκειαι, μήνυέ μοι βοῦς
> θάσσον, ἐπεὶ τάχα νῶϊ διοισόμεθ' οὐ κατὰ κόσμον.
> ῥίψω γάρ σε λαβὼν ἐς Τάρταρον ἠερόεντα,
>
> ("Boy, you lying in the winnowing-fan: give me information about my cows, and quickly– since soon we will differ, against the order of things. I will seize you and fling you into murky Tartarus" Hom.*Herm*.256).

Apollo's commitment to the maintenance of distinct boundaries (in this case, to the limits of possession) threatens to upend the cosmological order by conferring onto himself a power unique to Zeus.[162] The use of κόσμον (cosmos) here to describe the rule of order governing the interpersonal relationship between Apollo and Hermes takes on a universal sense as a consequence. However, Hermes' response deflates the severity of the threat. When confronted and threatened by Apollo about the theft of the cattle, Hermes blurs truth and lies by using his

[162] See Thomas 2020, 289-290 for a comprehensive list of work that supports the cosmological significance of the threat.

apparent age as the basis for his deception. He first points out that Apollo's harsh tone is disproportionate to the situation and inappropriate to level against a child by suggesting that it is not reason that governs the god of reason at the moment. Addressing him by the matronymic, Λητοΐδη ("Son of Leto" Hom.*Herm*.261) to remind him of his status and lineage, Hermes highlights the absurdity of looking for cattle in a cave when they live in fields (βοῦς ἀγραύλους Hom.*Herm*.262). After appealing to his reason, Hermes appeals to Apollo's eyes: οὐδὲ βοῶν ἐλατῆρι, κραταιῷ φωτί, ἔοικα ("Nor do I resemble a cattle-rustler, a strong man" Hom.*Herm*.265). Emphasizing the apparent helplessness of his newborn appearance, Hermes points to the σπάργανά ("swaddling clothes") on his body and invites Apollo to not only listen to his clever speaker's words, but to marry the image of the infant before him to the baby's words.[163] Hermes' play at innocence reaches its peak when he reminds Apollo, χθὲς γενόμην ("I was born yesterday" Hom.*Herm*.273). In Hermes' dialogue, to threaten to upend the heavens to punish a day old baby over something seemingly irrational is out of character for Apollo. As Vergados correctly reminds us, the execution of Apollo's threat would likely only be possible through Zeus anyway.[164] Hermes, cognizant of this fact, undermines the seriousness of the threat through verbal deflection. Not only does Apollo, the god of prophecy,[165] fail to divine the location of the cattle, Hermes calls his bluff. However, despite his best efforts, Hermes' lies masquerading as truths do not sway Apollo.[166] Nor does his failure here prompt Hermes to

[163] Characteristic of his persuasive excellence, Hermes does not "simply rely on words to convey his helpless state," Rachel Ahern Knudsen, "Notes and Discussions: 'I Was(n't) Born Yesterday': Sophistic Argumentation in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*," (*Classical Philology* 107, no. 4, 2012): 344.

[164] Athanassios Vergados, "Shifting Focalization in *the Homeric Hymn to Hermes*: the Case of Hermes' Cave," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 51, (2011): 19-22.

[165] Vergados 2013, 417.

[166] Hom.*Herm*.282-285.

abandon his deceitful rhetoric before Zeus later on in the poem when the stakes are considerably higher. The inflexibility of his seemingly fluid Dionysiac nature prevents the trickster from attempting different strategies.

Despite the *Hymn's* emphasis on speech, rhetorical prowess does not diffuse the threat of violence, nor does it absolve Hermes of guilt for the theft and slaughter of Apollo's cattle. It is laughter, flatulence, and song that ultimately resolve the tension between Hermes and Apollo. As we have seen, not even the threat of cosmological upheaval sways the young Hermes to confess his crimes to Apollo. When that fact becomes clear to Apollo, the god laughs, τὸν δ' ἀπαλὸν γελάσας προσέφη ἑκάεργος Ἀπόλλων ("Breaking into a gentle laugh, far-working Apollo addressed him" Hom.*Herm*.281), and praises the infant god's rhetorical skill. The laughter indicates a shift in Apollo's strategy to induce a confession of guilt as his words turn from condemnation to praise when he confers the title of ἀρχὸς φιλητέων ("commander of robbers" Hom.*Herm*.292) onto Hermes. The amused Apollo sets aside his threats and decides to appeal to a higher authority to settle the dispute by means of an impromptu court hearing where the brothers will struggle to sway the judge Zeus using diametrically opposed kinds of speech.

Before Apollo can combat Hermes' Dionysiac speech before Zeus, the brothers' temporary touch and subsequent expulsion stages Hermes' inability to activate, even temporarily, the Apolline speech that marks his role as messenger in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Hermes physically repels Apollo with his flatulence, rejecting the comingling of Apolline and Dionysiac figures. Apollo's shift in strategy, from threatening to praising his younger brother, is also marked by a change in Apollo's spatial relationship to Hermes in that he elects to pick up the baby into his arms to convey him to Zeus. The rational Apollo can make no headway with

the trickster through speech and the god of rhetoric cannot persuade Apollo to accept his story, so Apollo bridges the gap between them physically by taking Hermes into his arms:

> ὣς ἄρ’ ἔφη, καὶ παῖδα λαβὼν φέρε Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων
> σὺν δ’ ἄρα φρασσάμενος, τότε δὴ κρατὺς Ἀργεϊφόντης
> οἰωνὸν προέηκεν ἀειρόμενος μετὰ χερσίν,
> τλήμονα γαστρὸς ἔριθον, ἀτάσθαλον ἀγγελιώτην,
> ἐσσυμένως δὲ μετ’ αὐτὸν ἐπέπταρε. τοῖο δ’ Ἀπόλλων
> ἔκλυεν, ἐκ χειρῶν δὲ χαμαὶ βάλε κύδιμον Ἑρμῆν
>
> ("So he spoke, and Phoebus Apollo took the child and began to carry him. But after consideration, at that moment the strong slayer of Argus as he was lifted between his hands sent forth a bird of omen – the stubborn [laborer] of the belly, an insolent message-man – and after it he gave an energetic sneeze of confirmation. Apollo heard him, and let glorious Hermes fall to the ground from his hands" Hom.*Herm*.293-298).

Immediately, the trickster and Apollo repel one another. As if unable to abide the touch of an Apolline figure, Hermes flatulates to escape Apollo's grasp.[167] The language of the passage reflects the incompatibility of the union of the two figures in its use of circumlocution and by appropriating the language of prophecy, an Apolline art. The language here concretizes a symbol with religious significance, the omen (οἰωνὸν), by grounding it in a metaphor of labor through the comparison to a ἔριθον ("day laborer" or "hired servant") to set up a simple dichotomy between the earthly and the heavenly. In other words, the divide between the brothers is as deep as the distance between the terrestrial worker and the heavenly signs read in prophecy.

Hermes' flatulence represents the rejection of Apollo's attempt to impose an Apolline identity onto the young god. Not only is Hermes' fart a laborer, but it is also an insolent messenger (ἀτάσθαλον ἀγγελιώτην), not unlike our young protagonist. As Thomas and others point out, it is impossible to ignore the parallels between the fart and Hermes as the workhorse

[167] Thomas 2020, 313-314.

messenger of the Greek pantheon.[168] However, while others see a parallel here to another noise making creation of Hermes, the lyre, as evidence of Hermes' rhetorical creativity, the prophetic fart represents the expulsion and suppression of the very same messenger tradition it references. The fart is not a spontaneous or involuntary reaction, as Hermes only "sends it forth" (προέηκεν) after pondering it over (φρασσάμενος) as part of a calculated stratagem to escape blame. The fart is everything that Hermes as the Apolline Homeric messenger is not, ἀτάσθαλον, ("senselessly presumptuous, arrogant, proud, insolent, of person").[169] In other words, the framing of the fart from the perspective of the Dionysiac Hermes constitutes a rejection of the *timai* that characterize the Apolline herald. For the young Hermes, his heraldic function is temporary (ἔριθον) and wicked and must be expelled from his person. It is fitting, then, that Hermes' rejection of his Apolline *timai* occurs in the company of the symbol of Olympian rationality and order, Apollo. It is no wonder that Apollo does not throw or drop Hermes in response to the flatulence, but that he sets Hermes free (ἔκλυεν), as if to acknowledge that this manifestation of Hermes does not belong in his care. Apollo's embrace constitutes an attempt to impose an Apolline identity onto Hermes, but the young god refuses to activate his heraldic function. Later, when Apollo once again attempts to bind Hermes again for fear that the young god will flee from him, the binds do not hold.[170] In fact, the bonds slip from Hermes and miraculously entrap the missing cattle "at Hermes' will" (Ἑρμέω βουλῆισι κλεψίφρονος Hom.*Herm*.413). Not only does Hermes repel any attempt by the Apolline figure to restrain him, but he also demonstrates that he

[168] Thomas 2020, 313-314.

[169] "ἀτάσθᾰλος" in: The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek, edited by: Franco Montanari.

[170] Hom.*Herm*.409-413.

is capable of using the very tools of Apollo against him, just as he repurposed and inverted the language of augury with his flatulence.

In the end, it is song, and not rhetoric, that will reconcile Apollo and Hermes and precipitate the exchange of *timai*. After being ordered to lead Apollo to the stolen cattle by Zeus, Hermes obeys, but he does not admit guilt: νεῦσεν δὲ Κρονίδης, ἐπεπείθετο δ' ἀγλαὸς Ἑρμῆς ("the son of Kronos bowed his head, and treasured Hermes complied" Hom.*Herm*.395). The god of rhetoric remains wordless before the king of the gods in the face of his failure to convince Zeus that he is no liar with his words alone: νημερτής τε γάρ εἰμι καὶ οὐκ οἶδα ψεύδεσθαι ("for I am unerring and do not know how to lie" Hom.*Herm*.369). At the location of the hidden cattle, Apollo once again attempts to restrain Hermes, but to prevent another violent altercation, the trickster soothes Apollo's anger and captures his attention with the newly invented lyre:

> γέλασσε δὲ Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων
> γηθήσας, ἐρατὴ δὲ διὰ φρένας ἤλυθ' ἰωή
> θεσπεσίης ἐνοπῆς, καί μιν γλυκὺς ἵμερος ἥιρει
> θυμὸν ἀκουάζοντα
>
> ("But Phoebus Apollo laughed with joy; lovely was the god-given clamour's sound as it shot through his senses, and sweet desire pervaded his spirit as he listened" Hom.*Herm*.420-423).

Not only does Apollo laugh, recalling the first alleviation of violence at line 281, overwhelming desire conquers his heart/spirit (θυμὸν). Apollo as the embodiment of the rational Olympian order succumbs to the sensory pleasures of the sound (ἰωή) of the lyre while listening (ἀκουάζοντα) to Hermes' song. The song that Hermes sings to Apollo to soothe his anger is in the epic vein of the *Theogony*, but the words of that epic have no place in the hymnic context.[171]

[171] "Hermes' second performance (423–33) belongs to a different genre, not hymnic but theogonic," Vergados 2013, 4-9.

Our only clue as to the nature of the song comes in the summary of its key narrative beats.[172] As we have seen previously, Hermes has no difficulty in appropriating the form of the Apolline register to affirm his commitment to Dionysiac speech. Though the differences between poetry and song are not nearly as clear in an ancient context as they are to Nietzsche in his attribution of song to the Dionysiac register, it is important to note here that it is not the language of the song nor its diegesis that moves Apollo.

Although laughter, flatulence, and song defuse the threat of violence, it is silence that resolves the matter of Hermes' *timai* and admits the young god into the Greek pantheon. Unlike the Apolline herald, who represents word and deed, the Dionysiac Hermes refuses to give words to his apparent capitulation before Zeus, just as the hymn suppresses the words of Hermes' epic *Theogony*. Hermes seeks to defuse the threat of violence, but he does not confess to the crime that precipitates the danger. After bestowing the lyre upon Apollo, Hermes' promises to never steal from Apollo, but he does not actually admit guilt for the first theft:

> καὶ τότε Μαιάδος υἱὸς ὑποσχόμενος κατένευσεν
> μή ποτ' ἀποκλέψειν ὅσ' Ἑκηβόλος ἐκτεάτισται,
> μηδέ ποτ' ἐμπελάσειν πυκινῶι δόμωιtheft:
>
> ("Then the son of Maia did nod assent, promising never to steal all that the Far-shooter owned – never even to go up to his strong-built house" Hom.*Herm*.521-523).

Tellingly, once again, we do not hear the promise from Hermes' own mouth. Afterall, words have profited the god of rhetoric very little throughout the *Hymn*, so it must be sweet sounds and sensory experience that conquer the god of reason. As a consequence, Dionysiac speech is not repressed, nor is it reconciled by the agreement brokered at the end of the hymn. The philosophical and physical incompatibility of the brothers informs Hermes' final gesture. Just as

[172] Hermes' theogony begins with the creation of the gods and the earth, followed by hymns to Mnemosyne and the other gods of the pantheon (Hom.*Herm*.424-433).

the non-verbal flatulence prevented the brothers' physical alignment, the silence in Hermes' apparent concession in the gifting of the lyre emphasizes the impossibility of bridging the gulf between their commitment to oppositional speech. The *Hymn*, far from ending in a reestablishment of the cosmological order, ends with a lacuna of language. The audience, like the brothers, must sit in the tension of the gap left by an unfulfilled promise.

3. Oscillation of the Apolline/Dionysiac

Having outlined the two roles of the messenger and their function within archaic Greek *epos*, the following sections confront the narratological consequences of the oscillation of the roles and how they manifest in the epic mode. Though the two forms of heraldic speech do not coincide or intersect within any one epic, they are felt nonetheless in their absence. The impression of one form of the messenger at any one time underscores a tension related to the incomplete nature of the epic narrative as the oscillation between Hermes' roles as Dionysiac trickster and Apolline herald reflects the delicate balance of closure and catastrophe in the epic register.[173] What remains in the space between the poles of the dual roles is the canvas of the epic narrative.

Hermes does not just represent two different kinds of speech in archaic Greek *epos*, his two manifestations are irreconcilable at any single moment in the text. The difference between the two is neither strictly due to differences in genre nor to Hermes' age/maturity in a given text. There is no satisfaction of appetite for the herald in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, and the Apolline messenger merely hints at the disorganization and ecstatic blurring of Dionysiac speech

[173] For Hardie, epic poems lack a definitive or satisfying ending precisely because it allows for an infinite number of readings as "the epic strives for totality and completion, yet is at the same time driven obsessively to repetition and reworking," Philip R. Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil: a Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition*, (Cambridge University Press, 1992): 1.

throughout the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* through innuendo. Similarly, any and all capitulation on Hermes' part in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* is in name only. There is no transformation or domestication of the trickster by the end of the *Hymn*. Peace between Apollo and Hermes is predicated on silence, as we have seen, and Hermes remains unconvicted, remorseless, and having made no confession to wrongdoing. Within the Apolline or Dionysiac representations of Hermes in archaic Greek *epos*, the opposite tradition is only perceptible through a shadow or gap left by its absence. No blurring of categories or personhood is to be found in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* except through the suppression of that impulse. For the Apolline register, Hermes' ineffectual attempts at deception and his unwilling participation in the reestablishment of the proper flow of fate reveal a tension that goes unresolved. The Apolline register of the herald does not allow for an expression of any aberration or deviation from the dictates of Zeus except through insinuation. For example, the closure afforded to Priam in *Iliad* 24 through Hermes' intervention is short-lived. A Greek audience knows full well how the story of the Trojan War ends, so even though Apolline speech governs the representation of Hermes' intervention in *Iliad* 24, the chaotic specter of Priam's imminent and bloody death looms regardless.

Though the epic genre makes gestures at closure, nonetheless the cycles of violence and endless readings of the subject material defy any and all attempts to provide a definitive and satisfying conclusion to the epic narrative.[174] It is respect for the definition of categories/roles that informs Hermes' preservation of the social order, and not the fulfillment of his desires in *Odyssey* 10. A human, and therefore terrestrial reward (ἑκατόμβας), must cede to heavenly

[174] "Homeric epic in its oral phase exists only through the possibility of reworking at each new performance. The monumental fixation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* perpetuates large and unified structures which are nevertheless still subject to the quality shared with the shorter recitations presumably typical of the main oral phase, of being parts of a larger whole, the entire timespan of the legendary and historical actions of men and gods," Hardie 1992, 11-12.

ambrosia and nektar, which Calypso provides for him.[175] It is the suppression of his Dionysiac appetite that allows Hermes to speak on behalf of Zeus and operate in service of the cosmological hegemon. Unlike Nietzsche's theory about the brothers Apollo and Dionysos, the repulsion/struggle within the body of Hermes is not seeking to relieve tension, nor is reconciliation of the two roles the goal of his speech acts. Whereas Nietzsche envisions a perfect union as the goal of artistic expression, Hermes rejects any single outcome or directive in the epic mode by giving the illusion or impression of resolution in his interventions.

Illusion of Resolution

The resolution of the *Homeric Hymn* and the exchange of *timai* at the conclusion of the poem rely upon the impression or shadow of stability. In the *Hymn*, the gifting of the lyre that so moves Apollo represents a point of tension in that Hermes can always steal it back, as the god of reason observes: δείδια, Μαιάδος υἱέ, διάκτορε ποικιλομῆτα, / μή μοι ἅμα κλέψῃς κίθαριν καὶ καμπύλα τόξα ("I am afraid, son of Maia, guide and intricate planner, that you will steal my lyre together with my curved bow" Hom.*Herm*.514-515). Apollo's anxiety is not unfounded, as Hermes is not only capable of stealing the lyre back, but he can also always make a new one. The agreement that mollifies Apollo mentions no stipulation that Hermes surrender any of the ingenuity that made the invention possible in the first place. In fact, the *Hymn* reminds us that Hermes continues to possess a power over the arts through the creation of the flute, αὐτὸς δ' αὖθ' ἑτέρης σοφίης ἐκμάσσατο τέχνην· συρίγγων ἐνοπὴν ποιήσατο τηλόθ' ἀκουστήν ("while he in turn sought out the craft of a second expertise: he created for himself the panpipes' clamour,

[175] "Ambrosia and nectar provide the sustenance of the gods" Heubeck 1990, 264. Whereas Hermes' stated preference in *Od*.5.102 is for the ἑκᾰτόμβη ("hecatomb"): sacrifice (proper. of one hundred oxen, but also of a lesser number and of various animals) in: The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek, edited by: Franco Montanari.

audible from afar" Hom.*Herm*.514-515), thereby encroaching on Apollo's newfound status as god of the arts. Though Hermes promises to never steal from Apollo in the future, the pledge relies upon the words of a liar, who when faced with the upheaval of the cosmos, violence, and the judgment of Zeus, cannot help but lie. Hermes, as the swift thought (ὠκὺ νόημα Hom.*Herm*.43) that plagues a man, suppresses the rational Apolline impulse in favor of anxiety. By expelling the messenger through his flatulence, it becomes clear that the Hermes is only capable of interfacing with his Apolline function as parody. Just as humor and misdirection diffuse the violent tension between Apollo and Hermes, so too does it influence the reading of the exchange of *timai*. The poem shows that it is unreasonable to suggest that knowledge of a craft can be surrendered. Hermes has stolen Apollo's cattle and slaughtered them, but because, τὸν δ' ἔρος ἐν στήθεσσιν ἀμήχανος αἴνυτο θυμόν ("Unmanageable desire seized the spirit in the other's chest" Hom.*Herm*.434), he wrongfully believes that a fair trade has been struck. Apollo's loss cannot be recouped, whereas Hermes has the option to make a new lyre at any point. To add insult to injury, Hermes earns the right to look after cattle during the exchange of *timai*. Apollo is under the false impression that a single symbol, the lyre, can encapsulate the entirety of the poetic arts and that it can be gained or lost. Apollo's understanding of the exchange of *timai* only occurs in the shadow/impression of Apolline speech created by the flatulence and silence of the Dionysiac Hermes.

Apollo's misunderstanding of the terms of the exchange undermines the common reading that the *Hymn* represents the cosmological stabilization of Hermes' role in the Greek pantheon. Jenny Strauss-Clay argues that the *Homeric Hymns* mark transitional moments during which power in the ancient Greek pantheon stabilizes in the third generation of the cosmological

order.[176] What then, does *The Hymn to Hermes* stabilize? In a standard reading of the text, the *Hymn* domesticates the trickster impulses of Hermes and, to use the language of the Nietzschean dyad, transforms his chaotic energy (Dionysiac) into a productive activity as a mouthpiece of the divine order (Apolline). However, the reading of the movement from chaotic to orderly here is too neat, and I disagree with Strauss-Clay that we are seeing a stabilization of the pantheon in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*. The exchange of *timai* remains symbolic insofar as the lyre, which Hermes surrenders, can always be remade. What is at work is a symbolic gesture. The metonymic lyre remains metonymic since there is no originary object to surrender. The poetic arts/composition cannot be contained in a single, material (tangible) object. Hermes' power in the *Hymn* derives from his disregard for discrete boundaries, which Apollo cannot emulate. If anything, the Hymn demonstrates the viability of alternative persuasive strategies that arise out of opposition to an Apolline model. After all, deception, violence, and greed admit Hermes into the Greek pantheon.

Unidirectionality

Related to the illusion of resolution is the way in which the epic Hermes models the transformation of failure into productivity through the depiction of an apparent unidirectionality of its orientation, incapable of deviation as either the Apolline herald or Dionysiac trickster. As an interventionist, the Apolline herald appears almost exclusively as the guide whose role is to facilitate the primary action of the narrative by interrupting the flow of that narrative. In the case of the *Hymn*, Hermes intervenes on a preexisting hierarchy of the Greek pantheon to carve out a place for himself at the expense of Apollo. Though the trickster figure does not act as a

[176] Jenny Strauss Clay, *The Politics of Olympus: Form and Meaning in the Major Homeric Hymns*, (Bristol Classical Press, 2006): 11.

messenger or interlocutor on behalf of the other gods in the *Hymn*, he nevertheless interrupts the stability of the Greek pantheon to advocate on behalf of and speak for himself. As Apollo reminds the audience towards the end of the *Hymn*, τιμὴν γὰρ πὰρ Ζηνὸς ἔχεις ἐπαμοίβιμα ἔργα / θήσειν ἀνθρώποισι κατὰ χθόνα πουλυβότειραν ("for from Zeus you have the prerogative that you will lay down the business of interchange for humankind across the nurturing Earth" Hom.*Herm*.516-517). Both models prove inflexible in practice and demonstrate an inability to adapt to the opposing speech, despite being represented by the same multifarious god of boundary crossing. Even failure does not precipitate a change in strategy, as we have seen with Hermes' commitment to deceptive speech in the *Hymn* and his inability to deceive in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The image of the backwards cattle march from the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* visually depicts the mechanics of the relationship between the two interventionist models and their unidirectionality. When he first herds Apollo's cattle towards Maia's cave, Hermes takes an unconventional route. While Hermes himself dons special sandals made of leaves and twigs to hide his footprints on the journey (Hom.*Herm*.79-86), he takes a different approach with the cattle:

> τῶν τότε Μαιάδος υἱὸς ἐΰσκοπος Ἀργεϊφόντης
> πεντήκοντ' ἀγέλης ἀπετάμνετο βοῦς ἐριμύκους,
> πλανοδίας δ' ἤλαυνε διὰ ψαμαθώδεα χῶρον
> ἴχνι' ἀποστρέψας· δολίης δ' οὐ λήθετο τέχνης,
> ἀντία ποιήσας ὁπλάς, τὰς πρόσθεν ὄπισθεν
> τὰς δ' ὄπιθεν πρόσθεν, κατὰ δ' ἔμπαλιν αὐτὸς ἔβαινεν.
>
> ("Then of their number the son of Maia, the sharp-sighted slayer of Argus, cut fifty loud-lowing cows off from the herd, and led them on a misleading path across sandy ground, turning their tracks backwards: for he did not forget his tricksy craft, but made the hooves their opposite – made the fore ones be behind, and the hind ones at the fore; and he himself began to step backwards downhill" Hom.*Herm*.73-78).

The sheer number of English words necessary to translate the complexity of the passage in the original Greek text speaks volumes. In an attempt to obscure his crime and misdirect anyone looking for the stolen cattle, Hermes forces the cattle to reverse their ἴχνι' (tracks) to make it appear as though they were walking in the opposite direction. Even if the confusing language mirrors the obtuse stratagem and forces the audience to question exactly what Hermes is doing, there is a glaring flaw in the trick.[177] The opposite hooves, ἀντία…ὁπλάς, regardless of orientation reveal an inability to veer away from a linear path. The location of the cattle is readable by the straight line drawn by their path, whatever the facing. Even if the sandals on Hermes' feet sweep away evidence of the cattle's tracks, flipping the direction of the cattle is a meaningless gesture as the evidence would be wiped away regardless. What the march demonstrates is that Hermes is trapped in his trickster register here, incapable of veering away from the preset limits of Dionysiac speech. His attempt to outsmart Apollo fails with the trick because Hermes is incapable of reckoning with his brother's Apolline logic. In this instance, Hermes' lust for meat undermines the logic of the trick and Apollo is able to see through it eventually. The cattle march, as a metaphor, speaks to the issue of disguise and epiphany in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in a similar fashion. Just as the cattle march cannot occupy both kinds of speeches, as we saw with the epiphanies of Hermes earlier, they are epiphanies in form only. Though Hermes reenacts the Homeric motif of the epiphany, his attempt to deceive the recipient of the epiphany fails to astonish the viewer. Both the Apolline and Dionysiac representations of Hermes are trapped in a single and unidirectional trajectory even when faced with failure.

Hermes' apparent failure to deceive Apollo results in the productive advancement of the plot and facilitates the acquisition of his *timai*. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call this

[177] Thomas 2020, 189.

failure a realignment insofar as the forward momentum of the trick wrangles multiple directions or outcomes into a single course. In its confusion, the cattle march misdirects Apollo, not away from the location of the cattle, but away from either extreme of Hermes' roles for which either Apolline logic or ecstatic Dionysiac chaos governs. Trying to decipher or uncover the logic or orientation of the backwards cattle is to temporarily occupy either role as a listener while struggling to decide if the trick is a clever ruse or playful game. The choice of reading forces the listener into applying a single outcome onto the text. In other words, the disentanglement of the cattle trick invites the listener to interrogate the direction of the epic narrative itself.

Epic as Lacuna

Just as the cattle march temporarily invites the reader to make sense of Hermes' role in the space between the Apolline or Dionysiac impulses of his *timai*, the oscillation of the trickster and herald roles creates a void in which the epic narrative unfolds. The lacuna or gap created by the shadow of the opposing Apolline or Dionysiac speech in archaic *epos* constitutes a parallel space through innuendo and the implication where the flow of cause/effect and generic consistency cease to function. Just as Hermes guides the cattle through a misleading (πλανοδίας) and unstable/sandy place (ἤλαυνε διὰ ψαμαθώδεα χῶρον), the site of the trickster or herald's intervention is insubstantial as it is rooted in language. However, this imagined side-space is temporary and exists only through the gap or omission of the opposing Dionysiac speech. In the *Hymn*, Apollo is capable of recognizing the signs of the theft only through the shadow that his rational epic register casts on the imagined space that Hermes' deception commands. In the case of the *Hymn*, lies create a space that does not abide by any laws of gestation, maturation, or logic where, free of the shackles of pure semblance, Hermes can slaughter, invent, and sing his way

into the Greek pantheon free of consequence. In the case of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, standard *topoi* such as the epiphany fail to function properly because the god's appearance does not match the delivery of his divine mandate. Similarly, the motif of the fatherland (πατρίδα γαῖαν) from *Iliad* 24 works to assuage human characters that the precariousness of their situations is temporary, but it relies upon the mobilization of Hermes' ability to blur distinct categories even as he reifies/concretizes a firm border or designation. This is stability that relies upon the impression of instability, but only through a gap, loss, impression, or shadow of the Dionysiac function. Intervention, as a side-space created through language, functions as a kind of isolated bubble within the larger framework of the primary diegesis, where narrative conventions can be subverted. It is for this reason that the interventions of Hermes in epic poetry present such difficult obstacles to commentators, ancient and contemporary; the Dionysiac trickster and the Apolline herald operate outside the bounds of the narrative.

Consider the story of Aphrodite and Ares, which takes place between Hermes' Dionysiac desire and his Apolline expression/representation of that desire, which is to say that the narrative transpires between the poles of his *timai*. Hermes' brief response to Poseidon in Demodocus' song in *Odyssey* 8. After Hephaestus ensnares Aphrodite, his wife, and Ares in bed together, Apollo asks Hermes if he would suffer the indignity of being held in chains (δεσμοῖς *Od*.8.336) and endure being made a spectacle by taking the place of Ares. Hermes responds,

> αἲ γὰρ τοῦτο γένοιτο, ἄναξ ἑκατηβόλ᾽ Ἄπολλον:
> δεσμοὶ μὲν τρὶς τόσσοι ἀπείρονες ἀμφὶς ἔχοιεν,
> ὑμεῖς δ᾽ εἰσορόῳτε θεοὶ πᾶσαί τε θέαιναι,
> αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν εὕδοιμι παρὰ χρυσέῃ Ἀφροδίτῃ
>
> ("Lord Apollo, Far-Shooter, three times as many inescapable links could hold me, and you gods could be watching, and yes, all the goddesses too, if only I might sleep with golden Aphrodite" *Od*.8.338-342).

Here, Hermes responds with the volitive optative exclusively (γένοιτο, ἔχοιεν, εἰσορόῳτε, ὕδοιμι) because he is locked within a side-space of Apolline language incapable of interfacing with his desire. In the self-contained narrative space of Demodocus' inset song, Hermes is stuck in place and only able to express wants in a hypothetical sense. What we see here is a heightened form of the same herald from the larger diegesis who suppresses his appetite in service to Zeus. Demodocus' song acknowledges the implication of Hermes' desire even though it is at odds with his Apolline function in the *Odyssey*. The song occupies the void between roles that is filled with the primary narrative action of the epic poem.

Conclusion

The drastic swing between the Apolline and Dionysiac impulses of Hermes' *timai* reflect the tension implicit in the iterability of the epic project and its rejection of closure. As tempting as it may be to label Hermes a wholly Dionysiac figure, given his transgressive nature, it is clear from the epic record that the god defies even the instability of a Dionysiac figure since he operates as a mouthpiece for traditional representation, having founded the Apolline arts through the creation of the lyre. The oscillation between the Apolline herald and the Dionysiac trickster demonstrates that closure for the epic trickster is, just like the use of deception in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, perfunctory, and it exists in form only since the shape of intervention is always incomplete. What other scholars identify as an emerging cosmological stability at the end of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* is just that, a perception of stability. The nature of archaic Greek *epos*, then, is instability itself because closure is not possible, and violence is eternal. Hermes is the form given to the tension of an unfolding narrative whose outcome exists between the poles of his oscillating representations. Epic poetry evades closure because these are stories that can

never end due to the nature of their repetition and reception. Therefore, in the figure of the god of poetry, the epic conductor embodies cyclicality itself as the true god of the epic mode.

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CHAPTER TWO:

Mediating Stasis in Mercury's *nusquam*

Introduction

One of the most tantalizing unsolved mysteries of the *Aeneid* is the problem of Mercury's need to intervene twice in Book 4.[178] Despite being a point of contention for critics and scholars since at least the 4th century CE, the implications of the problematic intervention remain largely unexplored.[179] Building on the tension between power/language, Zeus/Hermes, and the herald/trickster in archaic Greek *epos*, this Chapter considers how Mercury's failure to properly oscillate between his Apolline and Dionysiac *timai* leads to the creation of the *nusquam* ("nowhere") of Aeneas' dream space, a kind of paratext that exists outside the bounds of the narrative in which lies mobilize viable alternate outcomes, author new traditions, and stave off stasis.

The need for the *nusquam* arises out of the failure of Mercury's first two interventions to author new narratives. Mercury's devotion to Apolline expression comes at a cost of oscillation and the narrative suffers due to Mercury's inability to adapt his *timai* to the emergent needs of his tasks until his final appearance in Aeneas' dream. However, in the absence of a prescriptive Apolline mandate, the narrative does not dissolve into the kind of formless Dionysiac speech that

[178] As Denis Feeney observes in response to Mercury's two appearances in the *Aeneid*, "This double divine interruption into a human story of love and conscience is a notorious scandal to interpretation, and generations of readers and scholars have come up with more or less ingenious techniques for writing the disruptive Mercury out of the story," Denis Feeney, "Leaving Dido: The Appearance(s) of Mercury and the Motivations of Aeneas," *A Woman Scorn'd: Responses to the Dido Myth*, (Faber and Faber, 1998): 105.

[179] See Introduction 21-35 for an account of the difficulty.

originates from *Fama* in Book 4. The dream space gives a shape to the oscillation of Mercury's *timai* in an isolated paradiegetic space that is in constant flux.

This Chapter's approach to the ambiguity of the dreamspace and its relationship to Mercury's role as both narrative subject and facilitator of meaning in the poem is inspired by Karen Barad's work that puts queer theory in conversation with quantum physics. As the site of multiple ambiguities and alternative outcomes or readings of the poem, the dream space of *Aeneid* 4 mirrors the properties of a void according to Barad's definition of the term. While traditional physics holds that matter exists within an empty vacuum of space or void, quantum physics relies upon the principle of ontological indeterminacy, which posits that "the energy of the vacuum is not determinately zero."[180] According to Barad, "this indeterminacy not only is responsible for the void not being nothing (while not being something) but may in fact be the source of all that is, a womb that births existence."[181] Barad posits that the indeterminacy of the fundamental building blocks of the universe is queer since the seemingly stable processes of nature are only legible when an observer inscribes meaning onto them by measuring a state of matter at an arbitrary point in time.[182] Building on the evocative image of the fertile nothingness, I consider in this Chapter how Mercury's oscillations designate the space of the dream in *Aeneid* 4 as a void, which constitutes a kind of quantum field in which lies activate branches of alternative narrative possibilities that Mercury alone governs as the god of sleep, language, and intervention. Mercury's authority to direct the course of the diegesis derives from his negotiation

[180] Karen Barad, "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21 (2015): 394.

[181] Barad 2015, 394.

[182] "Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world," Barad 2007, 185.

of an infinite array of possibilities within the dream space of the *nusquam*, that, like the capricious and elusive quantum field of the void, is a queer space that exists both within and besides the primary diegesis of the epic.

The Three Interventions of Mercury

The following sections analyze the three appearances of Mercury in the *Aeneid* to consider how Greek intertexts complicate the function of intervention in the Latin poem through its treatment of the epic messenger's role as either the Apolline herald or Dionysiac trickster of archaic Greek epos. The ordering of the appearances is essential in that each new intervention builds on the previous one as the messenger's strategies respond to the consequences of his previous interventions and adjust accordingly. A chronological approach to the text also reveals that Mercury's appearances catalog a series of failures uncharacteristic of Hermes' interventions in Greek epic; the first two interventions result in failure until the final intervention transforms the nature of the narrative and rescues it from stasis by creating a paradiegetic space where his two manifestations can coexist.

Unlike the archaic Greek antecedents, Mercury's first two appearances do not interface with his oppositional roles through either innuendo or inference, and, in fact, he goes out of his way to suppress the oscillation in the attempt to impose a clear patrilinear chain of command over Aeneas. The rigidity of the strategy backfires and, as the text makes clear, does not result in a productive or effective means of evading stasis. More commitment to the Apolline register for the interventionist results in more chaos.

Mercury's three brief appearances in the *Aeneid* frame the primary action of the first Odyssean half of the epic.[183] It is Mercury who guarantees Aeneas' safe passage into Carthage in Book 1 (*Aen*.1.298-299), and it is Mercury who uproots the hero from his political and amorous designs in Book 4,[184] thus instigating the second Iliadic half of the poem. Given the importance of Mercury's meddling, it is surprising that the herald disappears from the poem after Book 4. This disappearance has been the subject of multiple investigations of the *Aeneid* in recent years by scholars such as Lee Fratantuono and Denis Feeney, however, none of the recent work on the questions posed by Mercury's central, yet brief, intervention has provided a compelling or satisfying explanation for Vergil's novel use of the epic herald. Most work on Mercury in Vergil has been to identify the episode's Homeric antecedent. This work has been uncompelling due to the misalignment of a potential source text with the *Aeneid* in terms of tone or context. Most studies fall into what Gian Biagio Conte identifies as "comparisonitis" or "collecting for the sake of collecting" in *The Rhetoric of Imitation.*[185] Comparisonitis refers to the act of looking for "influences" or "sources" for passages in each work through a kind of textual excavation. As Conte rightly observes, the act of collecting is reductive and ahistorical insofar as the attribution of a single source text for a passage denies the systemic nature of literary composition. Mercury's framing of the Odyssean half of the poem does more than signal a shift in the poem's primary source material; he reorients the hero and the narrative by colliding his Dionysiac and

[183] For a summary of scholars' impulse to divide the *Aeneid* into two Homeric halves, see Richard H. Lansing, "Vergil's Homage to Homer in 'Aeneid' 1.1-7," *Vergilius (1959-)* 54 (2008): 3–8.

[184] Mercury appears twice in *Aeneid* 4: he delivers Jupiter's mandate that Aeneas leave Carthage (*Aen*.4.219-278) and then, In his final appearance, shakes Mercury from his sleep (*Aen*.4.553-570).

[185] Gian Biagio Conte and Charles Segal, *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*, (Cornell University Press, 1996): 23.

Apolline functions from archaic Greek epos to institute a new model for successful intervention in the imagination of epic space.

1.) First Intervention: Stasis and Mismatched Timai

In this section, I argue that the complicated intertext of Mercury's first intervention demonstrates that the oscillation between Apolline and Dionysiac roles is not possible for the Mercury of the *Aeneid* as the messenger attempts to impose an Apolline posture onto a Dionysiac task. Scholars have compared Mercury's first appearance in the *Aeneid* to Athena's intervention in *Odyssey* 13, however, this section complicates that simple intertext by introducing the similarities between Mercury's intervention and the proem of *Aeneid* 1. A reevaluation of Athena's intervention from *Odyssey* 13 as intertext for Mercury's first intervention allows us to diagnose the root cause for Mercury's failure in *Aeneid* 1 and how it leads to the intrusion of stasis at the outset of the epic narrative. The failure of both the facilitator and the hero threatens to destroy the balance of catastrophe and closure that Hermes/Mercury governs in the Greek intertexts through the application of Mercury's Apolline role to a Dionysiac task. Additionally, the framing of the Dido episode and Aeneas' time in Carthage with the mismatched messenger results in the collapse of an identifiable authority when the faithful delivery of the Apolline word of Jupiter leads to narrative stasis.

Mercury's introduction to the *Aeneid* comes at a critical juncture in the text since Aeneas' safe delivery into the hands of a hostile North African nation in Book 1 represents a potential catastrophic circumvention of Jupiter's designs for the foundation of the Roman empire.[186] As

[186] "Mercury's first intervention in the narrative has the function of creating a concord between Trojans and Carthaginians (*Aeneid* I.297-304), but this pact will eventually destroy Dido and Carthage, since Mercury most emphatically does not mediate the speech/rationality/knowledge of Jupiter to Dido, who remains *fati nescia*…As far as Jupiter is concerned, it is undeniably an act of concord for Aeneas to

the epic begins, it is unclear if Aeneas will survive the destruction of his fleet by Juno or the hospitality of her favorite city-state, Carthage. Venus' appeal to Jupiter to intervene at this moment speaks to the seriousness of the threat that the emerging Mediterranean power poses to the scattered Trojan refugees who arrive on Dido's shores when she asks,

> quid meus Aeneas in te committere tantum,
> quid Troes potuere, quibus, tot funera passis,
> cunctus ob Italiam terrarum clauditur orbis?
>
> ("what can my Aeneas have done to you that's so serious,
> what have the Trojans done, who've suffered so much destruction,
> to whom the whole world's closed, because of the Italian lands?" *Aen*.1.231-233).[187]

At the insinuation that the *orbis* ("world") is *clauditur* ("closed off") to Aeneas, Jupiter arranges for the land to be open (*pateant, Aen*.1.298) to the Trojans in a clandestine operation.[188] Jupiter dispatches Mercury immediately after speaking to Venus to bring about his promise in what is the herald's first appearance and intervention in the *Aeneid*. How exactly Mercury accomplishes his mission is unclear, as the intervention comprises only 8 lines and Mercury does not transmit any commands from Jupiter.[189] Nevertheless, by enlisting the aid of Mercury at this critical juncture, Jupiter mollifies Venus and alleviates any potential tensions between the Carthaginians

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continue towards the right future in Italy," D. C. Feeney, "Leaving Dido: The Appearance(s) of Mercury and the Motivations of Aeneas," *A Woman Scorn'd: Responses to the Dido Myth*, (Faber and Faber, 1998): 110.

[187] English translations of the *Aeneid* throughout the Chapter come from A.S. Kline's translation unless otherwise noted. Latin text for the *Aeneid* comes from Virgil, Clyde Pharr, and Alexander Gordon McKay, *Vergil's Aeneid, Books I-VI*, (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1998) and Virgil. *Aeneid: Books 7-12. Appendix Vergiliana,* translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 64, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918).

[188] Mercury's task is to make sure that Aeneas and his men cannot be attacked or threatened with martial violence in Carthage; any hospitality, however, is presumably not supposed to deter Aeneas from his Hesperian destiny," Lee Fratantuono, "Lethaeum Ad Fluvium: Mercury in the 'Aeneid,'" *Pallas*, no. 99 (2015): 296.

[189] For his first appearance, Fratantuono argues that Mercury, acting on the orders of his father, and Jupiter, "virtually shade into one," Fratantuono, 2015: 297.

and the Trojans. Even though Mercury carries out Jupiter's wishes, his success threatens to undermine the purpose of Venus' plea, Jupiter's decree, and Mercury's intervention when Aeneas falls in love with the Carthaginian queen, Dido, and refuses to leave her for a nebulous future in Italy.

Throughout the poem, Mercury operates under two different mandates from Jupiter that are seemingly at odds; despite his promise to Venus that *neque me sententia vertit* ("no thought has changed my mind" *Aen.*1.260), Jupiter demands that Mercury bring the Trojans and Carthaginians together only to tear them apart in *Aeneid* 4. Additionally, Mercury's first intervention succeeds in the short term to assure the safety of the Carthaginians, but in so doing, he fails to safeguard Jupiter's ultimate goal of delivering Aeneas into Italy. Therefore, the first appearance of Mercury in the *Aeneid* begs the question: what makes a successful intervention by the Mercurial figure unsuccessful? In the following section, I argue that the disconnect between Jupiter's intention and Mercury's action is the result of the application of the incorrect model of heraldry from archaic Greek *epos*. In Book 1, Mercury adopts an Apolline posture for a task better suited to the Dionysiac trickster due to the affective nature of the task. As a voiceless herald in Book 1, Mercury cannot truly succeed where he does not belong.

Athena vs. Mercury

Before analyzing the resonances between Mercury's first appearance and the proem, it is necessary to complicate the intertext of *Odyssey* 13 when Athena intervenes on behalf of Odysseus. A number of incongruities between *Odyssey* 13 and *Aeneid* 1 suggests that a simple comparison between the two is insufficient to understand the nature of Mercury's mission, his unique role in the Latin text, and the need for multiple interventions to accomplish Jupiter's

directive. Previous scholarship has attributed the model for Mercury's intervention to a single line from *Odyssey* 13, however, little has been done to explore other intertexts for the episode.[190] The search for a single correct intertext undermines the complexity of Mercury's role and the novelty of the Vergilian invention of the Mercurial figure, which builds on a rich poetic tradition, and not a single source. As we will see, though there are superficial similarities between *Odyssey* 13 and *Aeneid* 1, the differences are vast and beg for an analysis of supplemental models that expand what is possible for the herald to accomplish in the epic mode.[191] I will focus here primarily on three key differences between *Odyssey* 13 and *Aeneid* 1; urgency, secrecy, and fittedness in order to show that Athena, in an interventionist role, tackles a task better suited to a Dionysiac figure. Mercury, in a similar situation to that of Athena opts instead for an Apolline posture in Aeneid 1, thereby undermining his own success.

After Aeneas' fleet shipwrecks off the coast of Carthage, and Venus pleads for Jupiter to intervene on the hero's behalf, so the king of the gods dispatches Mercury to North Africa. The short description of Mercury's intervention comprises only five lines:

> Haec ait, et Maia genitum demittit ab alto,
> ut terrae, utque novae pateant Karthaginis arces
> hospitio Teucris, ne fati nescia Dido

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[190] According to E. L. Harrison, "The well-established model for Aeneas' arrival at Carthage is the arrival of Odysseus on the island of Scheria," E. L. Harrison, 'Virgil's Mercury,' in A. G. McKay, Vergilian Bimillenary Lectures 1982, *Vergilius*, suppl. vol. 2 (Vancouver, 1982): 8. This is a view shared by more recent publications such as Denis Feeney, "Leaving Dido: The Appearance(s) of Mercury and the Motivations of Aeneas." *A Woman Scorn'd: Responses to the Dido Myth*. Faber and Faber, 1998: 105-27; see also Sergio Casali "Crossing the Borders: Vergil's Intertextual Mercury," in John F. Miller, and Jenny Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury*, (Oxford, 2019): 173 and Fratantuono 2015, 646.

[191] "The similarities are clear. Mercury, sent by Jupiter after larbas' prayer, is the analogue of Hermes, sent by Zeus in response to Athena's complaint that Odysseus is languishing with Calypso. The descriptions of the preparations of Hermes and Mercury for departure are similar (putting on sandals, taking up the wand). Most striking of all, each god interrupts his flight with a stop on a mountain (Hermes pauses on Pieria, *Od*. 5.50; Mercury on Atlas, *Aen*.4.246-53), and both are likened to birds (*Od*. 5.51-4; *Aen*.4.253-5). Finally, both gods bring messages that put an end to an amorous relationship that stands in the way of the hero's progress," Fratantuono 2015, 646.

finibus arceret: volat ille per aera magnum
remigio alarum, ac Libyae citus adstitit oris
Et iam iussa facit, ponuntque ferocia Poeni
corda volente deo; in primis regina quietum
accipit in Teucros animum mentemque benignam.

("Saying this, he sends Mercury, Maia's son, down from heaven, so that the country and strongholds of this new Carthage would open to the Trojans, as guests, and Dido, unaware of fate, would not keep them from her territory. He flies through the air with a beating of mighty wings and quickly lands on Libyan shore. And soon does as commanded, and the Phoenicians set aside their savage instincts, by the god's will: the queen above all adopts calm feelings, and kind thoughts, towards the Trojans" *Aen*.1.297-301).

The passage above features a stock Homeric motif of the messenger's descent followed by a vague description of how he pacifies the Carthaginians.[192] Harrison argues that the genesis of this short passage is a single line from *Odyssey* 13 (302), when Athena claims that she alone is responsible for Odysseus' warm welcome by the Phaeacians when he washes ashore in Scheria:

οὐδὲ σύ γ᾽ ἔγνως
Παλλάδ᾽ Ἀθηναίην, κούρην Διός, ἥ τέ τοι αἰεὶ
ἐν πάντεσσι πόνοισι παρίσταμαι ἠδὲ φυλάσσω,
καὶ δέ σε Φαιήκεσσι φίλον πάντεσσιν ἔθηκα

("Still you failed to know me, Pallas Athene, Zeus' daughter: she who is ever by your side to protect you in all your adventures. It was I who made the Phaeacians kind to you" *Od*.13.299-302).

Unlike the passage from the *Aeneid*, Athena's speech to Odysseus in *Odyssey* 13 privileges her special role in his safe conduct to the Phaeacians all the way back in *Odyssey* 6. However, Athena obscures the details of the protection that she offered to him in the previous Book. In terms of aid rendered in the body of *Odyssey* 13, Athena shows Odysseus where to hide the spoils of his journey, helps him plot the death of the suitors, and disguises him as an old man so

[192] For a list of intertexts that share the Homeric motif, see Casali 2019, 173-174.

that he can move through Ithaca anonymously.[193] By unpacking the suppressed details of Athena's previous appearance, we can see that the relationship between Book 6 and 13 are as different to each other as they are to the context of *Aeneid* 1.

Athena makes three distinct interventions in *Odyssey* 6. First, Athena appears to Nausicaa in disguise as Dymas' young daughter and encourages her to do her laundry in the river where she will encounter the shipwrecked Odysseus for the first time (*Od*.6.20-47). Then, to ensure that Nausicaa discovers Odysseus, Athena rouses Odysseus from his sleep as Nausicaa nears his location, γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη, / ὡς Ὀδυσεὺς ἔγροιτο (*Od*.6.112-113). Finally, to guarantee Odysseus' safety and to make the Phaeacians φίλον ("kind"), she enhances Odysseus' physical beauty: τὸν μὲν Ἀθηναίη θῆκεν Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα / μείζονά τ᾽ εἰσιδέειν καὶ πάσσονα ("then Athena, the daughter of Zeus, made him taller to look upon and mightier" *Od*.6.229-230).

Urgency

The difference in tone and content between the *Odyssey* 13 and *Aeneid* 1 speaks to the relative urgency of the danger posed to Odysseus and Aeneas. When Athena appears to Odysseus, he had already left Scheria and arrived in Ithaca (*Od*.13.184-216). Now that the danger has passed, Athena seeks credit for her previous interventions in *Odyssey* 6. Athena's sudden shift from third to first person when she reveals herself centers her involvement and personalizes the larger cosmological struggle of Odysseus' voyage. Athena boasts of her great service to Odysseus to shame him into recognizing her efforts as emphasized by the two present indicative verbs in the first person in quick succession at the end of lines 301 and 302 followed by a shift to the aorist: παρίσταμαι, φυλάσσω, and ἔθηκα ("I support (you), "I protect (you), "I

[193] For an exhaustive account of Athena's deeds throughout the *Odyssey* and her similarities to Odysseus, see Lillian E. Doherty, "Athena and Penelope as Foils for Odysseus in the 'Odyssey,'" *Quaderni Urbinati Di Cultura Classica* 39, no. 3 (1991): 31–44.

made (you dear to them.)" The intrusion of the aorist in the string of present indicative verbs signals that support and protection are continuous, but that the danger is not. Afterall, Odysseus' safe return to Ithaca is never in doubt.

The urgency of Mercury's mission is clear through the timing of the intervention. The brevity of Mercury's appearance itself speaks to the urgency of the task insofar as the economy of language puts an emphasis on actions. There are 9 clauses in 8 lines, and all the verbs belonging to these clauses are in the present tense: *demittit* ("he sends"), *pateant* ("they open"), *volat* ("he flies"), *facit* ("he makes"), *ponunt* ("they put"), *accipit* ("she receives."), *facit* ("he makes"), *ponunt* ("they put"), *accipit* ("she receives"). The insistence of the present aspect of the passage serves two primary purposes in that it heightens the imminent danger posed by the Carthaginians and suggests that Aeneas' fate is not as secure as Jupiter claims. Dido's epithet here, *fati nescia Dido* ("Dido, unaware of fate," *Aen*.1.299) which foreshadows her death, suggests that all outcomes, including Aeneas', are in flux. The focus is on the ever evolving present, and not on the past. After all, Dido dies *nec fato merita nec morte* ("not through fate, or by a well-earned death" *Aen*.4.696). The suggestion here is that there is still plenty of time for Aeneas to avert Jupiter's plans. It will be Mercury in the end who finally alleviates the danger of stasis by reorienting Aeneas and the trajectory of the narrative. Aeneas will no longer be a refugee wandering the Mediterranean by the time Mercury is done with him in Book 4.

Secrecy and Pantomime of Deception

The secrecy and the impersonal nature of the intervention suggest that the context for Mercury's intervention is markedly different than the Odyssean parallel. In *Odyssey* 13, The dissolution of deception is far more important than the deception itself in the exchange between Athena and Odysseus. When Athena appears to Odysseus disguised as a shepherd and reveals

that he has finally arrived in Ithaca, οὐδ᾽ ὅ γ᾽ ἀληθέα εἶπε, πάλιν δ᾽ ὅ γε λάζετο μῦθον ("he concealed the truth, smothering certain words before they were spoken" *Od*.13.254). In order to shield himself from any potential harm, Odysseus lies about his identity and the circumstances of his arrival. Athena only reveals her true form to Odysseus after delighting in his attempt to deceive her:

> ὣς φάτο, μείδησεν δὲ θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη,
> χειρί τέ μιν κατέρεξε: δέμας δ᾽ ἤϊκτο γυναικὶ
> καλῇ τε μεγάλῃ τε καὶ ἀγλαὰ ἔργα ἰδυίῃ:
>
> ("The goddess, bright-eyed Athene, smiled at his words, and touching him with her hand altered her form as she did so to that of a tall and lovely woman, accomplished in every glorious art" *Od*.13.287-289).

In this way, she rewards Odysseus' lies with the truth of her identity. As we have seen, Athena centers herself in her speech, removing any uncertainty related to her identity or her responsibility for Odysseus' safety.[194] Unlike the pantomime of deception on display in the Odyssean episode, Mercury's mission in *Aeneid* 1 is truly clandestine. The nature of Jupiter's interference is never made known to Aeneas. It remains a secret shared only by the gods and the listener/reader.

Fittedness

Athena's intervention in *Odyssey* 13 more appropriately embodies the characteristics of a Dionysiac interlocutor such as the epic trickster due to her ability to alter different characters' emotional states and sexual appetites through the transformation of bodily appearance. To hide Odysseus among the suitors in Ithaca, Athena,

[194] *Od*.13.287-299. For further information about the patterning of deceptions and revelations throughout Athena's intervention, see "I.2 Disguise, recognition, narrative" of A. M. Bowie's commentary on *Odyssey* 13, Homer, and A. M Bowie. 2014. *Homer: Odyssey Books XIII and XIV*. Cambridge University Press, 2014): 6-15.

κάρψεν μὲν χρόα καλὸν ἐνὶ γναμπτοῖσι μέλεσσι,
ξανθὰς δ᾽ ἐκ κεφαλῆς ὄλεσε, ἀμφὶ δὲ δέρμα
πάντεσσιν μελέεσσι παλαιοῦ θῆκε γέροντος,
κνύζωσεν δέ οἱ ὄσσε πάρος περικαλλέ᾽ ἐόντε:
ἀμφὶ δέ μιν ῥάκος ἄλλο κακὸν βάλεν ἠδὲ χιτῶνα,
ῥωγαλέα ῥυπόωντα, κακῷ μεμορυγμένα καπνῷ

(*"*wrinkled the smooth skin on his supple limbs, and thinned the fine hair on his scalp, and gave him the body of an old man. She dimmed the beauty of his eyes, and dressed him differently, in a wretched cloak and ragged tunic, of tattered filthy smoke-grimed cloth" *Od*.13.430-435).

The transformation of Odysseus' body here parallels Athena's beautification of his body in *Odyssey* 6, where she uses Odysseus' outward physical appearance as a snare to work on Nausicaa's amorous desires:

τὸν μὲν Ἀθηναίη θῆκεν Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα
μείζονά τ᾽ εἰσιδέειν καὶ πάσσονα, κὰδ δὲ κάρητος
οὔλας ἦκε κόμας, ὑακινθίνῳ ἄνθει ὁμοίας.

("Athene, daughter of Zeus, made him seem taller and stronger, and made the locks of his hair spring up thickly like hyacinth petals" *Od*.6.229-231).

In both instances, physical attributes are the catalyst that drive an interior change through the blurring of categories. The use of two different nouns for hair in the passages above illustrates this point. When beautifying Odysseus to ingratiate him to Nausicaa, Athena transforms his κόμη (hair on the top of his head) by making it thicker (οὖλος**)** like the petals of a flower (ἄνθει). However, when she diminishes Odysseus' social ranking and beauty, she thins the τρίχας from his head. The term τρίχας, from θρίξ, can refer to human hair, but it also refers to the coarse hair of wooly animals such as pigs, horses, and sheep.[195] The parallel transformations reveal that success for Odysseus hinges on the efficacy of the transformation into a flower vs. an animal. Athena's success at handling a mission of emotional manipulation in *Odyssey* 6 suggests that there is an epic blueprint for handling matters of the heart, which involves the intoxicating

[195] "θρίξ" in: The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek, edited by: Franco Montanari.

dissolution of the distinctions between old/young and dirty/regal. The ecstatic blurring that informs Athena's actions is more closely aligned with the role of the Dionysiac trickster, but that role is confined to *Odyssey* 6 and not *Odyssey* 13, the clearest Homeric intertext for *Aeneid* 1. The multiple layers at work between the three different episodes muddies a simple one-to-one comparison between any single aspect. However, what is clear is that, when tasked with defusing the potential hostility of a foreign nation, Mercury deviates from Athena's successful Homeric model.

Incongruent Task

What emerges from a detailed analysis of *Odyssey* 13 is that Athena's intervention represents a Dionysiac task, to which the Apolline Mercury of *Aeneid* 1 is unsuited. Jupiter's directive requires a deftness in emotional awareness that Mercury, in the guise of the Apolline herald and the rational extension of Jupiter's *logos*, lacks. Mercury cannot stand in for Athena successfully in *Aeneid* 1 because the form of his intervention is inappropriate to the delicacy of his mission to intervene in a matter of the heart.

A close reading of Athena's account of her intervention in *Odyssey* 13 reveals that she has been engaged in a Dionysiac task insofar as her actions work on the body through deception and the blurring of boundaries. Her account is vague and does not correspond to the episode from *Odyssey* 6 in its depiction of specific details. No mention is made of a spell or attempt to ingratiate Odysseus to Nausicaa. Athena's personal involvement amounts to greasing Odysseus' hair.[196] So how exactly does a god make a person or persons φίλον ("kind") or *novae pateant*

[196] When Odysseus is taken in by Nausica, we learn that

> Ιτὸν μὲν Ἀθηναίη θῆκεν Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα
> μείζονά τ᾽ εἰσιδέειν καὶ πάσσονα, κὰδ δὲ κάρητος

Karthaginis arces / hospitio Teucris ("open the citadels of new Carthage in hospitality to the Trojans")? Are these actions even the same thing? Mercury's presence alone seemingly mollifies the Carthaginians, since no further explanation of his task follows the description of his journey from Olympus to Carthage. Whatever effect Mercury's presence has on the Carthaginians is left to the imagination since neither the Trojans nor the Carthaginians affect any outward or inward change as a result of his journey. In fact, Venus' treatment of Dido in *Aeneid* 1 more closely resembles Athena's meddling in *Odyssey* 6 than Mercury's influence on the Carthaginians in the corresponding passage.[197] It is Venus and Juno who will interfere more directly and appreciably when they forge their own pact, independent of Jupiter and Mercury (*Aen*.1.223-296). Whereas Athena works her magic directly on Odysseus' body, Mercury circumvents any display of deception to touch the inner workings of the Carthaginians' minds through the nebulous implementation of Jupiter's will (*volente deo*) in the mode of the Apolline herald.[198] No improvisation, deception, or speech act marks Mercury's first intervention. Mercury operates as an intermediary in Book 1, but he does not deliver any speech. Nor does he, as a tool of the cosmic hegemon, make use of his characteristic freedom, which distinguishes his role from the other divine herald of archaic Greek epic, Iris.[199] Jupiter imagines a course of action, inspired by his daughter's petition, and Mercury embodies the application of his imagination without the

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οὔλας ἧκε κόμας, ὑακινθίνῳ ἄνθει ὁμοίας.

("Athene, daughter of Zeus, made him seem taller and stronger, and made the locks of his hair spring up thickly like hyacinth petals," *Od*.6.230-232).

[197] Insofar as Venus secretly contrives to ingratiate Aeneas to Dido just as Athena makes Odysseus more attractive to Nausicaa, Fratantuono 2015, 296.

[198] *Aen*.1.303.

[199] For a comparison of the various messengers of classical epic and the differences between their roles, Feeney 1998, 106-107.

need for the transmission of language. As a consequence, Dido accepts a quietude reflective of the silence of the intervention: *in primis regina quietum / accipit in Teucros animum mentemque benignam* ("the queen above all adopts calm feelings, and kind thoughts, towards the Trojans" *Aen*.1.303-304). Compare this outcome to that of Cupid's intervention in the same Book. This is why Venus' proxy, Cupid, is so effective when he *donisque furentem* / *incendat reginam, atque ossibus implicet ignem* ("rouses the passionate queen by his gifts and entwine the fire in her bones" *Aen*.1.559-560) because the situation calls for the manipulation of the characters' interiority.

Mercury attempts to meddle in the emotions of the Carthaginians, but unlike Athena, does so through the assumption of his Apolline role as herald. There is no corresponding passage to explain in detail what Mercury does to the Carthaginians or how he accomplishes it by means of a god's desires (*volente deo*), however, it is clear that his actions are not gentle nudges.[200] Mercury has a hand in shaping the innermost thoughts and feelings of the Carthaginians in a way that Athena does not, whose intervention is restricted to the shaping of exterior features. Mercury's mission would be better suited to the Dionysiac trickster rather than the Apolline herald due to the affective register of the task and its intended effect to blur the distinctions between stranger/friend, violence/hospitality, and hatred/love. However, there is no trace of the Dionysiac trickster in Mercury's intervention here. Concerned for the preservation of the cosmological order, Mercury is only able to act as the Apolline herald. The tension between Mercury's identity and his intervention is manifest in his appellation; Mercury is only ever identified by his matronymic title, *Maia genitum* ("the son of Maia" *Aen*.1.297), in *Aeneid* 1. His association with the earthly Maia here highlights the incompatibility of his role to his father's

[200] As Fratantuono notes, "Virgil does not describe the action of Mercury in executing his father's orders," Fratantuono 2015, 296.

task.[201] The formulaic epic motif of Mercury's descent is not able to fulfill a similar role to Athena even when we consider the drastic divergences in context. Mercury's lack of fittedness leads to an intervention that does not meet the requirements of the task. In some regards, Athena makes for a more successful trickster than the herald of *Aeneid* 1 in this case as she is able not only to fool the trickster Odysseus, but to manipulate the Phaeacians.

Given the divergences in fittedness, urgency, and deception along with the incongruity of the task, it is clear that a simple comparison to *Odyssey* 13 is insufficient to explain the context of Mercury's first intervention in *Aeneid* 1. The lack of a clear model for Mercury's intervention in Book 1 speaks to the larger failure of authority at the beginning of the poem, when multiple gods who share similar goals, work at cross purposes. In addition to Mercury's visit to Carthage, Venus and Cupid conspire behind Jupiter's back on Aeneas' behalf, and Juno, with the help of Aeolus, attempts to subvert Jupiter's desires and obstruct Aeneas' voyage.[202] Within this muddied environment, the stock motif of the herald's descent is insufficient to unite the various competing threads or to fulfill a similar role to Athena in *Odyssey* 13. While there are certainly echoes of Athena's intervention in the passage from *Aeneid* 1, those echoes alone cannot account for all the complexities at play in *Aeneid* 1 because of the episode's divergences in context and function. In a Book in which multiple intermediaries make their presence known, Mercury's silence suggests that there is no clear interventionist program at the beginning of the epic, at least so long as other voices drown out the representative of the cosmological hegemon. In light of the

[201] Fratantuono provides a family tree for Hermes/Mercury and notes that, "Mercury, too, is the son of a Titaness (and, as we shall soon enough be reminded, the grandson of a giant rebel against the Olympian order); he thus serves in part to bridge the violent history between Jupiter and his predecessors in power," Fratantuono 2015, 297.

[202] At *Aen.*1.657, Venus *At Cytherea novas artes, nova pectore versat* ("But Venus was planning new wiles and stratagems in her heart") and sends Cupid to Dido in the guise of Ascanius to influence Dido's feelings towards Aeneas.

glaring differences between the *Odyssey* 13 and *Aeneid* 1 and the difficulty of pinpointing a clear Homeric antecedent for the first appearance, an analysis of the proem from Book 1 reveals an essential linkage between Mercury's mission and that of Aeneas.

Proem Parallel

The incompatibility of Mercury's task and the expression of his *timai* mirrors Aeneas' displacement in the proem of Book 1. The similarities between both passages suggest that Mercury, like Aeneas at the beginning of *Aeneid* 1, is adrift and in danger of being overcome by stasis at a critical juncture in the narrative, unlike the successful Athena of the *Odyssey*. A side-by-side comparison of the two passages reveals that both share technical and thematic concerns, which align Mercury's mission in his first intervention and that of Aeneas in ways that the Homeric intertext for the episode does not. While compelling work has been done to link Odysseus to Hermes in the Odyssey, the linkage between Mercury and Aeneas remains largely unexplored.[203] To help clarify the similarities, I have reproduced both episodes below and divided each into two passages based on modern syntactic conventions. I have also color-coded linguistic resonances shared between them and underlined the central line of passages 1a and 2a:

[203] See Jenny Strauss Clay, "Hide and Go Seek: Hermes in Homer," in John F. Miller, and Jenny Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury*, (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Aeneid 1.1-11	*Aeneid* 1.297-303
1a.) Arma virumque canō, Trōiae quī prīmus ab ōrīs Ītaliam, fātō profugus, Lāvīniaque vēnit lītora, multum ille et terrīs iactātus et altō vī superum saevae memorem Iūnōnis ob īram; multa quoque et bellō passus, dum conderet urbem, inferretque deōs Latiō, genus unde Latīnum, Albānīque patrēs, atque altae moenia Rōmae.	2a.) Haec ait, et Maia genitum demittit ab alto, ut terrae, utque novae pateant Karthaginis arces hospitio Teucris, ne fati nescia Dido finibus arceret: volat ille per aera magnum remigio alarum, ac Libyae citus adstitit oris.
1b.) Mūsa, mihī causās memorā, quō nūmine laesō, quidve dolēns, rēgīna deum tot volvere cāsūs īnsīgnem pietāte virum, tot adīre labōrēs impulerit. Tantaene animīs caelestibus īrae?	2b.) Et iam iussa facit, ponuntque ferocia Poeni corda volente deo; in primis regina quietum accipit in Teucros animum mentemque benignam.

When viewed side-by-side, the passages reveal that Mercury and Aeneas travel along similar trajectories in the framing of the first four books of the *Aeneid*. As we can see, though the metrical positions vary across lines, the similarity between sense units is striking. Passages 1a and 2a begin with a verbal affirmation or statement of purpose (*ait, cano*), which set the spatial and physical positioning of the characters into motion. Both concern the outcome of a figure made victim by fate, Dido (*fati nescia*) and Aeneas (*fātō profugus*) and the lands/places (*terrae, terrīs*) that hinder or help those victims. Aeneas and Mercury both move through space by means of disyllabic verbs with a sibilant first letter (*volat, venit*) until their movement comes to a stop (*adstitit, conderet*) at the end of their tasks. Passages 1b and 2b shift to dealing with the agitated emotional states (*animis*) of the queens (*regina*) Juno and Dido, whose kingdom *Juno dea gentibus esse, / sī quā Fāta sinant, iam tum tenditque fovetque* ("They say Juno holds and cherishes above all others" *Aen.*1.17-18). The slight differences in the framing of the passages demonstrates that, though Mercury and Aeneas are on related journeys, they are, as of yet out of synch. Aeneas suffers until he can establish or set the foundations (more literally "to bury") the *urbem* from which will rise the fortifications of Rome, *altae moenia Rōmae*, while Mercury

needs to open up the *Karthaginis arces*. One must lay the groundwork for the defense of Rome and the other must make the fortresses of Carthage vulnerable. In this way, no one sense unit can occupy the precise location of the proem because the alignment between Aeneas and Mercury is not yet completely fixed.

The lines of the two passages give a shape to the stasis that characterizes both episodes, and that shape is a spiraling black hole pulling the characters out of alignment and into a textual gravity well. Rather than oscillate between Dionysiac or Apolline roles, the Mercury of *Aeneid* 1 flounders in place, spinning along a central axis rather than sliding between poles, just as Aeneas, adrift and directionless, spirals towards Dido's shores. Imagined three-dimensionally, in the transition from passage 1a to 2a, the lines of 2a revolve around a kind of gravity well with a central axis drawn through lines 4 and 299. Sense units at the outer edges of 1a rotate and move closer to the heavily spondaic line 4 until they rest at the center of 2a. For example, forms of *altus* swap position with forms of *ora* at the beginning or end of the passage, while the verbs *volat* and *venit* move closer to the central axis. To illustrate this movement with a visual aid, I have included below a diagram of a gravity well which shows how matter both approaches and rotates along a dense object in space:

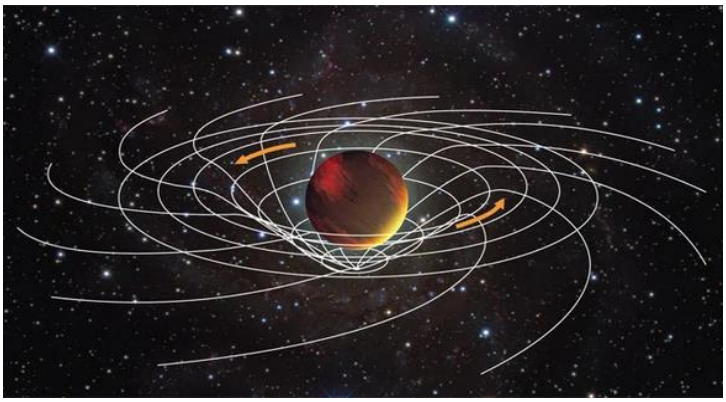

Figure 1. Illustration of frame-dragging (Image by Annie Rosen, in Alex Dunbar and Neil Ashby, "Dragging Frame," VICE (2011), (https://www.vice.com/en/article/the-learning-corner-805-v18n5/).

Similarly, the central line around which 1a and 2a rotate concerns the queens featured in 1b and 2b. In this way, the queens narratively and literally interrupt Mercury and Aeneas' tasks. The two halves also bifurcate two central themes in the poem: the movement (spatially and figuratively) towards public duty and the role of personal desire. For example, the playful contrast of *volvo* ("to roll/turn") and *volo* ("to want"), which share the linguistic form *volvere,* suggests that there is a linkage between desire and suffering. The presence of both heavenly and terrestrial queens demonstrates that the cosmological and personal/amorous stakes are codependent and inseparable. The gravity of Juno and Dido pulls the alignment of Mercury and Aeneas out of sequence. As a consequence, Mercury is incapable of successfully achieving his goal to secure Jupiter's vision and Aeneas is incapable, as of yet, of extricating himself from Carthage.

Both Aeneas and Mercury are on a collision course, unable to reorient themselves spatially and locked into a rigid performance of their duties that denies the possibility of oscillating between spaces or roles. The language of the proem and Mercury's first intervention represents this unidirectionality through the depiction of their horizontal or vertical orientations. The pairing of *altus* and *ora* to frame the spatial mapping of Mercury and Aeneas at the end of the first and last lines of the passages above illustrates the relationship by creating a unidirectional pole along either a horizontal or vertical axis. Aeneas travels horizontally, both physically and conceptually, through space and time; Aeneas' physical body crosses the sea from the shore (*ab oris*) of Troy to Italy, relocating the site of the cultural and political power of the Mediterranean as he moves in a westward direction. Additionally, the *altus/ora* pairing replicates in miniature the three interventions of Mercury, who begins his task from the high heavens and ends it on the shores of Carthage, compelling Aeneas to set sail before the *mare* ("sea") itself

rises up against him if Aurora finds him delaying on *terris* ("land").[204] The inversion of the *altus* and *ora* is striking in that both figures move perpendicularly to each other until they collide in Book 4. It is only when their paths converge in Book 4 that Aeneas is able to break free his wanderings over land to build up his own walls in Latium and Mercury is able to accomplish his own mission to safeguard Jupiter's directives.

The examination of the Odyssean intertext alongside the parallel of the proem of *Aeneid* 1 demonstrates that the primary threat to the accomplishment of Jupiter's prophecy for Rome in the first half of the *Aeneid* is Mercury's execution of his father's directive. Ultimately, the danger of stasis arrives due to the fact that Mercury's first intervention as an Apolline herald is too successful for the requirements of the task because an attempt to meet a Dionysiac task as the Apolline herald results in stasis as Aeneas becomes too attached to his Carthaginian host. Both hero and god are drawn towards oppositional narrative forces and unable to orient their own trajectories at the beginning of the epic. Rather than follow a blueprint readily available from the Homeric precedent by Athena, Mercury attempts to solve an affective problem in the guise of rational stability. Even if "Vergil in fact provides eight lines to reproduce an effect that in Homer occupies just one,"[205] as Harrison argues, Vergil shifts the focus of that effect so radically that another explanation must be sought for the placement of Mercury here in relation to his other two appearances in Book 4. Mercury and Aeneas require reorientation in order to escape the pull of environmental and intertextual burdens, but both figures will not be freed from their respective gravity wells until Book 4, where the horizontal and vertical axis of their journeys collide.

[204] *Aen.*4.566-568.

[205] Harrison 1982, 8.

2.) Second Intervention: Failure of the Apolline Herald

Mercury's second intervention puts him in the awkward position of attempting to undo a task that, on first inspection, appears to have been successful. Unfortunately, the misapplication of his *timai* leads to a situation in which the representative of the gods interrupts the flow of the narrative by introducing a condition for which stasis is the only possible outcome. Rather than facilitate or guide, Mercury undermines Jupiter's larger directive. In Mercury's second intervention, he adopts a role that is the most traditionally Homeric of all three of his appearances in the poem in that this episode, in which Mercury admonishes Aeneas face to face, most closely follows preexisting formulae for epic interventions while restaging the most Homeric tropes and activating more intertextual references than all of his other appearances throughout the poem.[206] In fact, the chain of communication between Jupiter, Mercury, and Aeneas is linear, clear, and uncomplicated. However, despite the pedigree of the scene's intertexts and its faithful reimplementation of Homeric precedents, once again, Mercury's intervention outright fails to accomplish Jupiter's directive.[207] When Mercury appears before Aeneas' eyes and demands that he resume his journey after considering his obligation to his son, Ascanius, Aeneas drags his feet.[208]

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[206] "The formal Homeric model here is *Od*. 5.1–262, of Zeus' mission for Hermes to order Odysseus' release by Calypso," Lee Fratantuono and R. Alden Smith, *Virgil, Aeneid 4: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, Vol. 462, (Boston: Brill, 2022): 318. Unlike his first intervention, which lacks a clear Homeric parallel in either the *Odyssey* or *Iliad*, Mercury will don his messenger's garb, descend from Olympos, and deliver a faithful account of Jupiter's commands to Aeneas: "As messenger of Jupiter, Mercury plays the same role as the Homeric personification of popular report, 'Occa, 'messenger of Zeus'," Philip R. Hardie, *Rumour and Renown : Representations of Fama in Western Literature,* (Cambridge ; Cambridge University Press, 2012): 92.

[207] For a breakdown of the similarities of Mercury's second intervention to Odyssey 5, See Kevin Muse, "'Don't Dally in This Valley': Wordplay in *Odyssey* 15.10 and *Aeneid* 4.271," *The Classical Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2005): 646.

[208] "As it happens, Aeneas' departure from Dido's Africa will not be so easy, and certainly not immediate," Fratantuono 2022, 301.

In this section, I argue that the linear chain of authority itself is to blame for Mercury's failure. The uncomplicated imposition of a patrilinear power structure mirrors the failure of pure semblance or pure language to direct the course of the epic diegesis in *Aeneid* 4. Unlike the first intervention which paired the Apolline herald to a Dionysiac task, Mercury will meet an Apolline task as the Apolline herald. Nevertheless, despite matching the needs of the assignment to his role, the mouthpiece of traditional semblance and authority fails anyway. Mercury's second intervention stages the failure of language in the epic mode alongside *Fama*'s flight in Book 4, which mirrors and inverts Mercury's appearance and demonstrates how language itself can be an enemy of the truth. Rather than argue that *Fama* is a foil to Mercury, I claim that *Fama*'s flight fulfills the same role as Mercury's intervention in Book 1. *Fama* conducts a clandestine mission to interfere with the interior feelings of Iarbas just as Mercury imposes Jupiter's will on the unknowing Carthaginians. In each instance, pure language delivery alone proves insufficient to reorient the epic hero. Filial or paternal obligation alone is not sufficient to make a successful intervention. Mercury's second appearance builds on the parallels between Aeneas' mission and his first intervention through the exploration of their obligations to their families. Mapping the idea of family lineage to literary antecedents shows that the activation of tradition through the replication of poetic models does not constitute a successful intervention. The inheritance of Mercury's titanic lineage through his maternal grandfather, Atlas, disrupts the simple transmission of authority and language through father to son.[209] The process of donning the Apolline model from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* attempts to rectify the misapplication of his *timai* to resume the oscillation of his roles, but he fails, nonetheless. The institution of family here acts

[209] Mercury is the descendant of rebels, and his complicated family tree interrupts the simple transmission of authority from father to son in this task: "Mercury, too, is the son of a Titaness (and, as we shall soon enough be reminded, the grandson of a giant rebel against the Olympian order); he thus serves in part to bridge the violent history between Jupiter and his predecessors in power," Fratantuono 2015, 297.

as a metaphor for the inheritance of literary antecedents and intertexts for the episode to demonstrate that lineage itself or the reliance on formulae cannot overcome the threat of stasis.

Fama

Fama, the god of rumor, invades the lands of North Africa by restaging Mercury's first intervention in Aeneid 1 in reverse by replacing goodwill with suspicion.[210] *Fama* works in secret to achieve an affective task as a boundary blurring Dionysiac messenger.[211] By comparison, *Fama* retroactively reveals the extent of Mercury's inability to secure Aeneas' journey in *Aeneid* 1. *Fama* is not so much a counterpart to Mercury as a temporary vessel given to unbridled and directionless Dionysiac language, which as of yet, has not been a feature of Mercury's interventions since he has been unable to shift polarity between his trickster or herald roles.[212]

Fama's restaging of Mercury's first intervention reinforces the incongruity of his first mission to the task by inverting his own strategy to achieve her aims. Before Mercury intercedes in Book 4, *Fama* descends unbidden from the sky to spread rumors blurring truth and lies about Dido and Aeneas' relationship. In so doing, she stirs anger in the heart of Iarbas, the North

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[210] For more information on the relationship between *Fama* and Mercury, see Chapter 3, "Vergil's *Fama*," and Chapter 4, "Fame and defamation in the *Aeneid*: the Council of Latins," in *Rumour and Renown,* Hardie 2012.

[211] I follow Philip Hardie's reading that Fama is an exceptional presence within the epic insofar as, "Within Virgil's Homeric-style narrative of human, divine and demonic actors she appears to be matter out of place, as being a palpable personification allegory with no reality other than that of an abstraction temporarily clothed with a body, of sorts, and equipped with an ad hoc genealogy to domicile her within the Homeric-Hesiodic family of divine beings," Hardie 2012, 79.

[212] "Mercury (Hermes) is the son of the supreme sky-god Jupiter. *Fama* is the daughter of Earth. *Fama* is the embodiment of crooked and half-true words, Mercury is often allegorized in antiquity as Logos, Ratio, the unperverted word of reason," Hardie 2012, 93.

African king whom Dido previously has pledged to marry. As scholars have convincingly argued, *Fama*'s descent mirrors and inverts Mercury's intervention in Book 4 as she herself is a herald: *tam ficti pravique tenax quam nuntia veri* ("as tenacious of lies and evil, as she is messenger of truth"*Aen*.4.188).[213] *Fama* navigates the space between the heavens and the Earth, *nocte uolat caeli medio terraeque per umbram / stridens* ("She flies, screeching, by night through the shadows between earth and sky" *Aen*.4.184-185), just as Mercury, who *haud aliter terras inter caelumque uolabat / litus harenosum ad Libyae* ("flew between heaven and earth to Libya's sandy shore" *Aen*.4.256-257). The difference between the messengers' ability to bridge the mortal and the immortal in the lines above is a matter of emphasis. *Fama*'s disruptive and clandestine purpose mirrors the language of the Latin here in that her descent is *per umbram*, passing through the darkness between the earth and sky. The hidden space between realms places her in a similar position to that of Mercury in Book 1 as he works mysteriously behind the scenes in Carthage. Both messengers meddle in the interior thoughts of ill-fated lovers as *Fama*,

> haec passim dea foeda virum diffundit in ora.
> protinus ad regem cursus detorquet Iarban
> incenditque animum dictis atque aggerat iras.
>
> ("The vile goddess spread this here and there on men's lips.
> Immediately she slanted her course towards King Iarbas
> and inflamed his mind with words and fueled his anger" *Aen*.4.195-197).

Just as Mercury visits a monarch in secret to accept *quietum* ("peace") into her *animum* ("soul"), *Fama* places *iras* ("anger") in Iarbas' soul and sets it ablaze (*incendit*). The goals of Mercury and *Fama*, seemingly different on a first reading, achieve the same miserable outcome by heightening the precarity of the mortal characters' situation and by instigating more violence and confusion. The greatest departure from Mercury's first wordless intervention is that *Fama*

[213] For example, see Feeney 1998, 113 and Hardie 2012, 92-93.

accomplishes her task by means of language (*dictis*), and though she is a *nuntia,* it is unclear on behalf of whom or what she works.

Fama is a herald with no mandate, whose destructive power is language itself.[214] The use of language (*dictis*) as a weapon that pierces Iarbas' innermost being reflects the framing of her arrival. She first appears in *Aeneid* 4 suddenly and without preconditions:

> Extemplo Libyae magnas it Fama per urbes
> Fama, malum qua non aliud velocius ullum
> mobilitate viget virisque adquirit eundo
>
> ("Rumor raced at once through Libya's great cities,
> Rumor, compared with whom no other is as swift.
> She flourishes by speed, and gains strength as she goes" *Aen*.4.173).

The reiteration of the language of speed and movement with language such as *extemplo* ("suddenly"), *it* ("goes"), *velocius* ("more quickly), *mobilitate* ("speed"), and *eundo* ("going"), highlights the abrupt scene shift and the unexpected danger. *Fama* is her own subject who compels herself to *it* ("go") without the prompting of a higher authority. Movement itself grants her strength since it is *eundo* that takes the ablative of means in line 197. The appearance of two forms of the word *eo* captures the ambiguity of both her arrival and her directive, in that the word connotes the most basic and general sense of movement.[215] It is not until 12 lines later that we learn that she *volat* ("flies") through the air. For all intents and purposes, *Fama* simply moves independently and unimpeded by conventions of time, space, or directionality. Even her body is a confused and *monstrum horrendum* ("horrendous oddity"), sprouting as many feathers as *tot vigiles oculi subter (mirabile dictu), / tot linguae, totidem ora sonant, tot subrigit auris* ("as

[214] "the words of *Fama* are given in indirect speech, appropriately for a kind of speech which exists through renewed reportings, and whose original source is typically untraceable," Hardie 2012, 93.

[215] *eo* 1. to go, proceed, make one's way (by land, water, etc., in a direction specified or implied), *Oxford Latin Dictionary* 1968, 610.

many watchful eyes below (marvelous to tell), as many tongues speaking, as many listening ears" *Aen*.4.181-183). Just as her body defies simple categorization, *Fama* appropriately *diffundit* ("pours out") speech like a formless liquid as she moves. The shapelessness of her language reflects the nature of her task in service of the Dionysiac blurring of discrete categories. It is only in the vacuum of authority left by the failure of Mercury in Book 1 that *Fama*'s unrestrained speech rules. Unable to oscillate, Mercury cedes the power of deception to a lesser herald.

Homeric Formula for the Apolline Herald

To combat the formless intrusion of Dionysiac rumor that *Fama* delivers, Mercury once again assumes the posture of the Homeric Apolline herald in his first appearance in Book 4.[216] The activation of the Apolline herald in the language of Mercury's descent signals a change in strategy for the messenger at the beginning of Book 4 when he adopts the symbols of his office as the faithful Apolline herald to Jupiter. While Mercury's descent in Book 1 is understated and perfunctory, Mercury now relies upon the extended ritual of donning his equipment that derives from the Homeric formula to correct his previous mistake in Book 1 and to wrest control of language back from *Fama* in Book 4. Mercury descends to Carthage for a second time at the request of Jupiter, who orders that Mercury force Aeneas to set sail (*naviget, Aen*.4.237). What follows is "a repeated Homeric prototype (*Iliad* XXIV.339-45 = *Odyssey* V.43-9),"[217] in which Mercury girds himself for the task:

> Dixerat. ille patris magni parere parabat
> imperio; et primum pedibus talaria nectit
> aurea, quae sublimem alis sive aequora supra
> seu terram rapido pariter cum flamine portant.

[216] "Ultimately Rumor brought the news to Iarbas that prompted his angry address to Jupiter; the supreme god was more than a little irritated at the report of what Aeneas was doing in Carthage, and now Mercury will be sent on a quintessentially Olympian mission to rectify the situation," Fratantuono 2022, 415.

[217] Feeney 1998, 113.

> tum uirgam capit: hac animas ille euocat Orco
> pallentis, alias sub Tartara tristia mittit,
> dat somnos adimitque, et lumina morte resignat
>
> ("[Jupiter] finished speaking. The god prepared to obey his great father's order, and first fastened the golden sandals to his feet that carry him high on the wing over land and sea, like the storm. Then he took up his wand: he calls pale ghosts from Orcus with it, sending others down to grim Tartarus, gives and takes away sleep, and opens the eyes of the dead," *Aen*.4.238-244).

These three lines unquestionably derive from Homer given that they are nearly identical. In fact, the corresponding passages in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are actually identical: εἵλετο δὲ ῥάβδον, τῇ τ᾽ ἀνδρῶν ὄμματα θέλγει, / ὧν ἐθέλει, τοὺς δ᾽ αὖτε καὶ ὑπνώοντας ἐγείρει ("He took with him that wand with which he lulls to sleep or rouses from slumber whomsoever he will").[218] Though Mercury's descent closely adheres to the Homeric *topos*, the inclusion of Mercury's chthonic nature is a novel addition.[219] Mercury's *virgam* ("wand,") not only grants him power over sleep, but it also confers the power to take life. Feeney takes note of these lines to argue that the *Aeneid*, "by introducing Mercury's power over the dead, alludes to the chthonic dimension of Hermes' personality, as the *Psychopompos* ('Escorter of souls')".[220] The ominous emendation to the source text foreshadows the human cost of the gods meddling in mortal affairs when Dido dies before her time at the end of the Book. However, an interesting contrast arises as a result. Despite the emphasis on the powers of the *virga*, Mercury will use neither in his immediate intervention. Mercury does not disguise himself and he guides no one. No epiphany occurs, nor does he cast spells to lull Aeneas or his subordinates to sleep. No one dies and no one journeys between the mortal world and the underworld. Mercury relies solely on the power of his rhetoric

[218] *Od*.5.47-48; *Il*.24.343-344.

[219] Feeney 1998, 113.

[220] Feeney 1998, 113.

to convince Aeneas to leave Carthage in this encounter, but the god of eloquence will fail to compel Aeneas when they collide on the shore of Carthage. In fact, emphasis on the process/ritual and the performance of the task here reveals, by comparison, how badly Mercury bungled the first intervention.

Patrilinear Obligations

Mercury's second intervention relies upon communicating and embodying the unbroken chain of patrilinear obligations. The renewed focus on the literary genealogy of the intervention in Book 4 mirrors the episode's reliance on filial piety in the face of the conflict between Aeneas' public and private obligations. Mercury, as the Apolline representative of his father's authority, centers the unconvincing speech of his second intervention on family and social obligation, linking metaphorically the concept of patrilinear obligations to the activation, through intertext, of Homeric literary traditions. However, the rigidity of Mercury's insistence on the maintenance of patrilinear power ultimately collapses. The episode melds different lineages of power (god to mortal, father to son, son to father) through family ties and the dutiful execution of masculine familial relationships. As Fratantuono and others have recently observed, *Iliad* 24 serves as a useful intertext for Mercury's first admonishment of Aeneas because of how it relates the relationship between Priam/Hector to Jupiter/Mercury and Aeneas/Ascanius.[221] Historically, scholars had argued that the model for the first intervention is *Odyssey*.[222] While some of the

[221] Mercury redirects Aeneas out of danger and back onto the correct path towards his destiny just as Hermes leads Priam to Achilles' hut on the shores of Troy. For a brief overview of similarities, see Fratantuono 2015, 299-300. See also Casali 2019, 187 and Kevin Muse, "VARIVM ET MVTABILE SEMPER FEMINA: Divine Warnings and hasty Departures in Odyssey 15 and Aeneid 4," *The Classical Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (2023): 232.

[222] "In each case the hero of the epic is to be sent on his destined way after an heroic interlude; in each case the god puts on magic sandals and takes up his wand before leaving; and finally the journey in each

circumstances of Mercury's descent are strikingly similar, the parallels do little to connect the content of Hermes' and Mercury's speeches. Harrison even concedes that "differences abound as well," and specifically calls attention to the fact that Hermes appears to Calypso, who "reluctantly agrees to let Odysseus go, whereas in the *Aeneid* it is the hero who receives the order and reluctantly leaves."[223] Of course, as was the case with the issue of intertext for the first intervention in *Aeneid* 1, one source does not eclipse or invalidate another. However, the emerging work on the *Iliad* intertext would benefit from a closer analysis on this parallel precisely because Mercury, unlike Hermes, does not accomplish his mission.[224]

In his speech to Aeneas, Mercury frames Dido as the primary obstacle to the fulfillment of the epic hero's paternal obligations to his son Ascanius, implicating Aeneas in a crime against a masculine world order that, if unresolved, will unravel the basic organizational principles of the cosmos.[225] According to Mercury's speech, Dido interrupts the unimpeded flow of masculine imperial rule, for which the messenger speaks, that will culminate in the foundation of Rome.[226] After descending from the heavens, Mercury comes upon Aeneas, dressed in Tyrian clothing and

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case is punctuated by a halt on a mountain, followed by a swift flight over the sea that is illustrated by a bird simile," Harrison 1982, 16.

[223] Harrison 1982, 16.

[224] "It is possible to indulge here in hyper-parsing and to say that Mercury in some sense failed in his task by omitting the key concluding command of Jupiter's edict and admonition—but again, the salient points were conveyed, and Aeneas clearly realized that he was supposed to leave, and in haste," Fratantuono 2022, 412.

[225] Of course, this is ironic insofar as, "Aeneas' abandonment, and thus Dido's (re)transformation into a Euripidean Medea/Aeetes, is provoked, or at least set in motion, by Mercury himself with his second and third visits to Carthage in Book 4," Casali 2018, 177.

[226] See Feeney 1998, 109 for an analysis of the pairings of Juno/Iris and Jupiter/Mercury as well as D. Fowler, "God the Father (himself) in Virgil," Proceedings of the Virgil Society, xxii (1996): 35-52.

hard at work fortifying the city of Carthage. Mercury, in plain view, scolds the hero for being forgetful of his people and his destiny:

> ut primum alatis tetigit magalia plantis,
> Aenean fundantem arces ac tecta novantem
> conspicit. atque illi stellatus iaspide fulva
> ensis erat Tyrioque ardebat murice laena
> demissa ex umeris, dives quae munera Dido
> fecerat, et tenui telas discreverat auro.
> continuo invadit: 'tu nunc Karthaginis altae
> fundamenta locas pulchramque uxorius urbem
> exstruis? heu, regni rerumque oblite tuarum!
> ipse deum tibi me claro demittit Olympo
> regnator, caelum et terras qui numine torquet,
> ipse haec ferre iubet celeris mandata per auras:
> quid struis? aut qua spe Libycis teris otia terris?
> si te nulla movet tantarum gloria rerum
> [nec super ipse tua moliris laude laborem,]
> Ascanium surgentem et spes heredis Iuli
> respice, cui regnum Italiae Romanaque tellus
> debetur.' tali Cyllenius ore locutus
> mortalis visus medio sermone reliquit
> et procul in tenuem ex oculis evanuit auram
>
> ("As soon as he reached the builders' huts, on his winged feet, he saw Aeneas establishing towers and altering roofs. His sword was starred with tawny jasper, and the cloak that hung from his shoulder blazed with Tyrian purple, a gift that rich Dido had made, weaving the cloth with golden thread. Mercury challenged him at once: "For love of a wife are you now building the foundations of high Carthage and a pleasing city? Alas, forgetful of your kingdom and fate! The king of the gods himself, who bends heaven and earth to his will, has sent me down to you from bright Olympus: he commanded me himself to carry these words through the swift breezes. What do you plan? With what hopes do you waste idle hours in Libya's lands? If you're not stirred by the glory of destiny, and won't exert yourself for your own fame, think of your growing Ascanius, and the expectations of him, as Iulus your heir, to whom will be owed the kingdom of Italy, and the Roman lands." So Mercury spoke, and, while speaking, vanished from mortal eyes, and melted into thin air far from their sight" *Aen*.4.259-278).

The corresponding intertext from the *Odyssey* lacks the vitriol and urgency of the passage above. Unlike the cordial Hermes who shares a drink with Calypso, Mercury attacks (*invadit*) Aeneas for his appearance. As we saw in the last Chapter, Hermes visits Calypso οὐκ ἐθέλοντα ("unwillingly" *Od*.5.99) and as an equal who dines on ἀμβροσίης ("ambrosia" *Od*. 5.93) as an

honored guest; αὐτὰρό πῖνε καὶ ἦσθε διάκτορος ἀργεϊφόντης ("So the messenger-god, the slayer of Argus, ate and drank" *Od*.5.94). Nothing in the *Odyssey* suggests the urgency and condemnation of Mercury's admonishment of Aeneas in *Aeneid* 4. After all, Aeneas was not being held against his will as was Odysseus. When Mercury finds Aeneas, he is figuratively and literally wearing his heart and his allegiance on his sleeve while wrapped in the trappings of Carthage made by his beloved: *Tyrioque ardebat murice laena / demissa ex umeris, diues quae munera Dido / fecerat* ("the cloak that hung from his shoulder blazed with Tyrian purple, a gift that rich Dido had made" *Aen*.4.262-264). Mercury's task is not to persuade a jailer to release a prisoner, but to convince a contented leader to forfeit his safety, prosperity, and relationship for another armed conflict. It will prove to be a tall order for Mercury to make violent conflict more appealing than the comforts of Carthaginian hospitality. Mercury condemns Aeneas as *uxorious* for assuming the guise of a foreign regent.[227] The insult not only conveys that a woman has supplanted Aeneas' political authority, but it also signals a violation of Jupiter's divine mandate that *genus alto a sanguine Teucri / proderet, ac totum sub leges mitteret orbem* ("he'd produce a people of Teucer's high blood, and bring the whole world under the rule of law" *Aen*.4.230-231). Aeneas' personal devotion to Dido undermines his duties as both a prince of Troy and as the figurehead of an entire imagined nation united under a single legal system. Construed in this language, Aeneas is guilty of committing a gendered crime according to his social, legal, and cosmological duties.

In contrast to Aeneas' failings, Mercury's seemingly dutiful execution of his father's directive serves as a foil as the messenger attempts to impose a clear Apolline chain of command

[227] *uxorious* 1. Of or belonging to a wife. 2. fondly or excessively attached to one's wife; marked or caused by such fondness, cited from Oxford Latin Dictionary 1968, 2123. Kline's translation, "For love of a wife" does not do the word justice as "this is Mercury at his most insulting," Fratantuono 2022, 447.

in the organization of his intervention. Jupiter himself construes Mercury's intervention in Book 4 as a family matter. Jupiter addresses Mercury as *nate* ("son" *Aen*.4.223) for the first and only time in the poem, when he summons the messenger god to discuss matters pertaining to Venus and her own son, Aeneas. When Jupiter airs his grievances against Aeneas, it is through the lens of his own daughter's promise: *non illum nobis genetrix pulcherrima talem promisit* ("This is not what his loveliest of mothers suggested to me" *Aen*.4.227-228). Jupiter frames his criticism of Aeneas as an injury against Ascanius, Aeneas' son and heir. In the language of Mercury's delivery of Jupiter's criticisms, there are a few key additions. I have included Jupiter's complaint alongside Mercury's delivery of the complaint to Aeneas below to demonstrate the differences between excerpts:

Jupiter's Speech	Mercury's Speech
si nulla accendit tantarum gloria rerum nec super ipse sua molitur laude laborem, Ascanione pater Romanas inuidet arces? ("If the glory of such things doesn't inflame him, and he doesn't exert himself for his own honour, does he begrudge the citadels of Rome to Ascanius?" *Aen*.3.232-234)	si te nulla mouet tantarum gloria rerum [nec super ipse tua moliris laude laborem,] Ascanium surgentem et spes heredis Iuli respice, cui regnum Italiae Romanaque tellus debetur ("If you're not stirred by the glory of destiny, and won't exert yourself for your own fame, think of your growing Ascanius, and the expectations of him, as Iulus your heir, to whom will be owed the kingdom of Italy, and the Roman lands" *Aen*.4.272-276)

As we can see, Mercury uses the form of Jupiter's directive but improvises and composes extemporaneously when he appears before Aeneas. Jupiter's admonition provides the basis for Mercury's harshest criticism of Aeneas after he accosts the hero, but unlike Iris, the other

Homeric messenger, Mercury expands upon Jupiter's message.[228] While Jupiter personalizes the problem of Aeneas' delay by invoking Ascanius' name, Mercury's improvisations on Jupiter's words turn the speech into a threat. He makes the connection between familial obligation and civic responsibility more explicit by linking Ascanius' hopes (*spes*) with that of Rome itself. By qualifying Ascanius with a present participle, *surgentem* ("rising" or "growing"), Mercury suggests that, just as Ascanius is in the process of growing and, therefore vulnerable, the project of empire building itself is at risk of failure if Aeneas, *regni rerumque oblite tuarum* ("forgetful of [his] kingdom and fate" *Aen*.4.267), does not follow the dictates of fate. The use of the present participle's continuous aspect creates an emotional affect that is not present in Jupiter's original message. The connection between the themes of family and responsibility become inseparable in Mercury's words. He reinforces the link by using the word *tellus* ("land"), in place of *arces* ("citadels") of Jupiter's message, to demonstrate that Italy is not just the site of a military campaign, but a future home for Aeneas' descendants. Feeney notes that in this address Mercury "is not so much *Peitho*, 'persuasion', as *Logos*, 'rationality' – though 'rationality' of a very particular kind, namely, the rationality and vision of Jupiter as interpreted by a partial and energetic witness".[229] In other words, Mercury may improvise, but he nevertheless remains a faithful interlocutor here. Mercury acts in full accordance and with due respect for his father. This fact heightens the tension brought about by Aeneas' delay since the passage frames Mercury as a good son and Aeneas as a bad father.

The contrast in the performance of fatherly duties and filial piety activates an understudied intertext with *Iliad* 24 when Hermes successfully facilitates a resolution for the

[228] In the *Iliad*, "the dominant feature is always the block repetition of the text of the message. Iris is the ancient equivalent of the tape-recorder," Harrison 1982, 10.

[229] Feeney 1998, 115.

burial of Hector that allows the epic narrative to conclude. It is in the construction of the father/son relationship that Mercury hangs the success of his father's designs for the future. Just as the language of Mercury's mission in *Aeneid* 1 and the proem align Aeneas and the messenger god, the second intervention introduces Priam, another tragic epic figure, into the web of intertext. The focus on paternal fidelity in *Aeneid* 4 echoes Hermes' intervention in *Iliad* 24 when the messenger god guides Priam through the Greek camp to retrieve Hector's body from Achilles. Unlike in the *Odyssey,* Hermes takes a more active role in the plot of the *Iliad* and leaves the task of simple message-delivery to Iris, "the mouthpiece of Zeus."[230] As Harrison notes, "Hermes, then, is brought in to act as escort, and, far from giving him any text to transmit, Zeus actually stresses his role as companion and listener"[231] as evident in Zeus' commands:

> Ἑρμεία, σοὶ γάρ τε μάλιστά γε φίλτατόν ἐστιν
> ἀνδρὶ ἑταιρίσσαι, καί τ᾽ ἔκλυες ᾧ κ᾽ ἐθέλῃσθα,
> βάσκ᾽ ἴθι καὶ Πρίαμον κοίλας ἐπὶ νῆας Ἀχαιῶν
>
> ("You love to guide travelers, and give ear to whomever you wish, so go and escort Priam to the hollow ships of the Greeks" *Il*.24.334-336).

In both epics, Hermes urges the two fathers onward to facilitate the advancement of the plot by fulfilling his role as the crosser of boundaries.[232] Priam moves from the safety of the Trojan city into hostile territory with Hermes' blessing and Aeneas crosses from the defined boundaries of Carthage toward Italy, but he also moves from a state of impiety back onto his fated path established by Jupiter. The importance of movement is highlighted by Hermes'/Mercury's first encounter with both fathers since in each instance he asks them a question about their spatial position: πῇ πάτερ ᾧδ᾽ ἵππους τε καὶ ἡμιόνους ἰθύνεις / νύκτα δι᾽ ἀμβροσίην, ὅτε θ᾽ εὕδουσι

[230] Feeney 1998, 107.

[231] Harrison 1982, 13.

[232] Feeney 1998, 105.

βροτοὶ ἄλλοι; (“Father, where are you off to, with your mules and horses, through the sacred night, when ordinary mortals sleep?” *Il*.24.362-363) and

> tu nunc Karthaginis altae
> fundamenta locas pulchramque uxorius urbem
> exstruis?
>
> (“For love of a wife are you now building the foundations of high Carthage and a pleasing city?” *Aen*.4.265-267).

A subtle difference marks each of these questions in that Priam ἰθύνεις (“guides, directs”) in the present tense because his action is ongoing and Hermes’ task is to help that movement along, while Aeneas *exstruis*, in the process of building the walls of Carthage, is standing still and Mercury’s task is to make him move along. When Priam happens upon Hermes he is in the process of risking harm piously for the sake of his son. This fact is attested by Hermes’ concern for Priam’s wellbeing: οὐδὲ σύ γ᾽ ἔδεισας μένεα πνείοντας Ἀχαιούς, / οἵ τοι δυσμενέες καὶ ἀνάρσιοι ἐγγὺς ἔασι; (“Do you not fear the Greeks and their fury, an enemy without shame, close by?” *Il*.24.364-365). With Aeneas we instead find that he has neglected his responsibilities and has put his son at risk unknowingly. This dynamic explains the respect Hermes shows to Priam and the disdain with which Mercury carries out his business in *Aeneid* 4. Priam represents the paragon of fatherliness as he is compared to Jupiter when Hermes first addresses him as πάτερ (“father” *Il*.24.362) and later when he states that in carrying out his mission he will protect Priam because φίλῳ δέ σε πατρὶ ἐΐσκω (“you are the very image of my own father” *Il*.24.371). Priam goes so far as to refer to Hermes as ὦ τέκος (“child.”) To call attention to this disparity, the *Aeneid* casts Mercury as the upset father scolding the disobedient child, Aeneas.

The Iliadic intertext of Priam’s journey bridges the Homeric literary models of intervention with the concern for unbroken patrilinear authority. Priam’s loss of Hector is not just a personal one as Troy also loses its heir and governing dynasty. The stakes of Mercury’s

intervention are just as high as those of *Iliad* 24 since Aeneas' choice between personal and public obligation will determine the future of not just the fractured Trojan state, but the Roman state as well. Within this larger Homeric context, Mercury represents his role as that of a safeguard of the *translatio* of power from Priam to Aeneas by preventing the tragedy of Hector's death and the loss of the Trojan kingdom from being repeated in Italy. Though Mercury pivots away from a single Odyssean strategy that failed in Book 1 for a combined Homeric one that combines both *Odyssey* here by relying on *Iliad* 24 and *Odyssey* 5, he still fails to execute his mission. Whereas the task was inappropriate to the situation in Book 1, no such problem occurs at the beginning of Book 4. What proceeds from this failure is a crisis in that, even with the full weight of his familial and literary pedigree backing him, the Homeric Apolline herald is still unable to reverse stasis of his own making. To expand on this crisis, we need to take a second look at a small interlude in Mercury's descent that undermines the generational authority and Homeric models that inform his speech to Aeneas when he encounters the titan, Atlas, his maternal grandfather.

Atlas

Despite Mercury's insistence on the authority of the literary and familial genealogy of his mandate from Jupiter, the intrusion of his mother's titanic lineage, through his contact with Atlas, prevents the Apolline Mercury from rescuing the narrative from the stasis of his own making. He remains unable to usurp or to wrangle the rampant Dionysiac speech of Fama when his grandfather, a static pillar of blurred features and representation of his own Dionysiac legacy, is stuck in place. For Mercury, the figure of Atlas functions as an ironic symbol of Dionysiac

language that is frozen in place and incapable of oscillation that mirrors his own failure in his first two interventions.[233]

The specificity of language to describe the landscape belies the Dionysiac blurring of boundaries that the titan's body presents. Mercury's temporary contact with his maternal grandfather suggests that the mission is doomed to fail because it activates an incompatible lineage for the current needs of *Aeneid* 4. With death-dealing stick in hand, Mercury descends to the Earth, but not before making a quick stop:

> illa fretus agit ventos et turbida tranat
> nubila. iamque volans apicem et latera ardua cernit
> Atlantis duri caelum qui vertice fulcit,
> Atlantis, cinctum adsidue cui nubibus atris
> piniferum caput et vento pulsatur et imbri,
> nix umeros infusa tegit, tum flumina mento
> praecipitant senis, et glacie riget horrida barba.
> hic primum paribus nitens Cyllenius alis
> constitit; hinc toto praeceps se corpore ad undas
> misit avi similis, quae circum litora, circum
> piscosos scopulos humilis volat aequora iuxta.
> haud aliter terras inter caelumque volabat
> litus harenosum ad Libyae, ventosque secabat
> materno veniens ab avo Cyllenia proles.
>
> ("Relying on it, he drove the winds, and flew through the stormy clouds. Now in his flight he saw the steep flanks and the summit of strong Atlas, who holds the heavens on his head, Atlas, whose pine-covered crown is always wreathed in dark clouds and lashed by the wind and rain: fallen snow clothes his shoulders: while rivers fall from his ancient chin, and his rough beard bristles with ice. There Cyllenian Mercury first halted, balanced on level wings: from there, he threw his whole body headlong towards the waves, like a bird that flies low close to the sea, round the coasts and the rocks rich in fish. So the Cyllenian-born flew between heaven and earth to Libya's sandy shore, cutting the winds, coming from Atlas, his mother Maia's father" *Aen*.4.245-258).

[233] "Atlas is a giant immobilized, holding up the heavens on his head, a stable prop of the established cosmic order, metamorphosed once and for all into a personification of endurance in the face of the forces of the storm," Hardie 2012, 94.

Though Mercury's descent here is his second, the language of the passage shares little with the same journey in *Aeneid* 1. The important dyad of *altus*/*ora* from the proem and Mercury's first appearance is absent. Instead, we find more precise terms such as *caelum*, *litora*, and *litus harenosum*. The replacement of euphemistic terms for more technical features brings the landscape into clearer focus here. Importantly, the sea transforms from the nebulous "deep" (*altus*) to the smooth and orderly *aequora* ("level/smooth surface of the sea").[234] However, the turbulent winds and the frigid punishment of Atlas contrasted against the apparent evenness of the Libyan coast belies any calm and prefigures the difficulty of Mercury's task. So, while the language becomes clearer in its description of the landscape, language alone here cannot circumvent the underlying tensions of Mercury's intervention. The fusion of body parts (*caput*, *umeros*, *barba*) and natural phenomena (*vento*, *imbri*, *nix*, *flumina*) speak to Mercury's larger mission to bridge the gap between the mortal or corporeal and immortal nature. However, Atlas' frozen state melds him to the Earth bodily, and though the natural elements that buffet Atlas are ever changing, the Titan is locked in stasis. No movement is possible for the Titan. There is no allowance for flexibility and no end in sight to his punishment. It is striking then, that the speedy psychopomp pauses his urgent mission to stand with the immobile Atlas. Importantly, though Mercury *adstitit* in *Aeneid* 1, "comes to stand" or "stop" (*sto*) at (*ad*) the shores of Libya in *Aeneid* 1, he *constitit* here, literally "to stand with or alongside" (*sto* + *con*) his grandfather. The prefix *con* changes the sense of the movement greatly in that Mercury shares in Atlas' immobility, if only for a moment. Mercury descends having received a mandate from his father, but a last minute pitstop complicates the direct line of authority from father to son, as Mercury's

[234] Maria Pilar García Ruiz argues that the use of *aequor* throughout the Aeneid creates "a series of interlinked scenes in which, through religious language and the form of prophecies, Aeneas progressively discovers the main elements of his destiny," Maria Pilar García Ruiz. "'Aequor': The Sea of Prophecies in Virgil's 'Aeneid.'" *The Classical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2014): 695.

titan lineage distracts him from his task. When Mercury intervenes in Book 4, it is as the Cyllenian, but it is the son of Maia (*Maia genitum*) who prepares the lands of Carthage for his visit, thereby seeding his grandfather's influence in Book 1 even as he attempts to perform the functions of a dutiful son for Jupiter.

Mercury's momentary contact with his grandfather, Atlas, on his descent to earth in Book 4 interrupts the imposition of his Olympian father's mandate, which we can trace through the naming conventions of the messenger throughout the epic. The inescapable association with his Dionysiac lineage, through his identification, undermines the larger Apolline context of the descent and further mires Mercury in the same stasis that characterizes the frozen Atlas. Though Mercury appears infrequently in the poem, it is noteworthy that he is almost never referred to by name. The table below lists the only four appellations of Mercury within the entire *Aeneid* and how often those appellations occur:

Identifications of Mercury

	Book 1	Book 4
Maia genitum	1	0
interpres	0	1
nate	0	1
Mercurius	0	2
Cyllenius	0	3

As we can see, The *Aeneid* identifies Mercury by his name only twice in Book 4, otherwise he is identified through his relationship to other gods or by title. After Jupiter calls on Mercury to hear his directive, the messenger god is not named again except by the epithet Cyllenius three times throughout the second intervention.[235] The title of Cyllenius aligns him with his stony

[235] *Aen*.4.252, *Aen*.4.258 and *Aen*.4.276.

grandfather, Atlas, through mountain imagery as the term means "the Cylenean, of Mt. Cyllene in Arcadia, birthplace of Mercury."[236] As a mountain man himself, the pull of Mercury's terrestrial status undermines his Apolline impulse to fulfill a directive from heaven, even as the language of the passage veers more heavily towards traditional Homeric models.

Mercury is only allowed to be named outside the context of his role as an intermediary in the *Aeneid*. It is in the interstitial space between the beginning and end of his appearances within the poem that Mercury becomes subordinate to his commitment to the performance of his Apolline *timai* or to his parents. On Olympos, before donning his heraldic symbols in Book 4, Mercury has possession of his name when Jupiter summons him to his side: *tum sic Mercurium adloquitur ac talia mandat: / 'vade age, nate, voca Zephyros et labere pennis* ("Then he spoke to Mercury and commanded him so: "Off you go, my son, call the winds and glide on your wings" *Aen*.4.222-223). Detached from his role as intermediary, Mercury is a bystander to the epic diegesis, whose identity is independent from his titles. It is only after Jupiter invokes the herald and demands that Mercury *vade* and take flight that he becomes an extension of his father's authority as his *nate* ("son"). Mercury will remain an agent of his father's will until his final appearance, when he reclaims his own name in his third and final intervention in the dream space, divorced from the terrestrial influence of his grandfather and the burden of Jupiter's directives. I will return to the final use of Mercury's name when I address his third intervention, as it is an exceptional circumstance that, I argue, transpires outside the bounds of his typical Homeric function. Nevertheless, as we see in the chart above and in his interactions as the mountainous offspring of his mother's Dionysiac legacy, Mercury is not capable of his

[236] Clyde Pharr and Alexander Gordon McKay, *Vergil's Aeneid, Books I-VI*, (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1998): 216.

characteristic improvisation. His epithets make him perpetually subordinate to his father, his mother, or his role as an Apolline herald, in the case of *interpres*.

While Mercury's lineage emerges from the ground itself as the offspring of Atlas, he is not capable of bridging the heavens and the earth effectively so long as he, like Atlas, remains frozen and incapable of oscillation. Mercury cannot link the oldest roots of the cosmos, as represented by the Titans, to the future of the Roman empire, because his strategy is not to align mortal and immortal concerns, but to impose a single Apolline vision of the future onto the earth. Similarly, Mercury cannot reconcile his mother's lineage as he inveighs against Dido's interruption to the patrilinear authority structure that the Iliadic intertext and familial triangulations in the episode introduce. Dido's interruption to the father/son patterning of the episode coupled with Mercury's matrilineal inheritance in his second intervention prevents the transmission of Jupiter's Apolline language to succeed. The transferred epithet of *piscosos scopulos* ("fishy rocks") alongside the description of Atlas' body melded to the natural landscape underscores this point. The fish are rocks and gods are mountains because we see written on the landscape that the stakes of Mercury's intervention are nothing less than the dissolution of the natural order of not just the family or patrilinear authority, but of the universe itself when the messenger god's performance of his duties is not able to meet the demands of his mandates or to oscillate appropriately in response to those same mandates.[237]

[237] The apparent awkwardness of the double simile at 254 (where Mercury descends *avi similis* ("like a bird") and then again at 256 speaks to the larger thematic confusion. Additionally, the question of the case of *avi* here as either the dative form of *avis* ("bird") or the genitive form of *avus* ('grandfather") leads Julia Dyson to observe that the same confusion happens again when Alecto delivers a mandate to Turnus in *Aeneid* 7, only in reverse. Both divine messengers demonstrate the same power to transform the natural and the human with their interventions. For more information about this transformation, see Julia Dyson, "Birds, Grandfathers, and Neoteric Sorcery in *Aeneid* 4.254 and 7.412," *The Classical Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1997): 314–15.

Compounding Failures

In his second appearance, Mercury's attempt to lock himself into a stable patrilinear hierarchy fails, and rather than flit between his mother and his father's roles, he stubbornly commits to a strategy that has already failed him in Book 1. The Homeric resonances with Mercury's second intervention place him firmly in the role of the Apolline herald. As a consequence, improvisation for Mercury's speech is limited and within the clear bounds of Jupiter's directive.[238] When Mercury speaks here, it is with the full authority of his father's lineage behind him since there is nothing less at stake in this episode than the representation of unbroken imperial power. The intertext with *Iliad* 24 reveals that the intervention revolves around a concern for familial roles, which rely upon the unbroken line of patriarchal authority from god to god, king to subject, father to son. However, Mercury's failure to motivate the delaying (*cunctatem*) Aeneas threatens to upend the future of Rome and Jupiter's vision of the cosmos. Unlike his first intervention, which does not neatly fit a Homeric paradigm, Mercury's second appearance interfaces with both Iliadic and Odyssean intertexts. Echoes of past successful interventions from Homeric material buttress the form of his appearance and the content of his speech. Nevertheless, despite the impressive pedigree of the intertext and the urgency of his mandate, Mercury fails to accomplish his mission yet again by being unable to separate Aeneas from Dido. As the Apolline herald, Mercury must rely on the faithful transmission of Jupiter's words alone to motivate Aeneas. However, confronted by the rampant Dionysiac speech of Fama and the lingering vestiges of his titanic legacy through his connection to Atlas, Mercury's Apolline powers of rhetoric fail. Immobile Atlas can offer no support for a

[238] However, Mercury did not include the *naviget* command from Jupiter's initial speech: "It is possible to indulge here in hyper-parsing and to say that Mercury in some sense failed in his task by omitting the key concluding command of Jupiter's edict and admonition—but again, the salient points were conveyed, and Aeneas clearly realized that he was supposed to leave, and in haste" Fratantuono 2022, 412.

problem of stasis when Mercury refuses to oscillate in his dedication to the patrilinear chain of command. Like his grandfather, Mercury will remain locked in stasis until he invades Aeneas' dream in his third and final appearance. Pure semblance/language is insufficient to meet the needs of the *Aeneid*, and so long as Mercury cannot adapt to the needs of his mandates, stasis will overwhelm the narrative. The failure of both his maternal and paternal lineages reflects the weakness of reception alone as a successful model for intervention, so Mercury must, in his final intervention, make space for new traditions.

3.) Third Intervention: The *Nusquam*

Mercury's rigid commitment to the Apolline herald and its familial and literary genealogy, regardless of context or success, in his first two interventions leads to a complete collapse of the narrative when Aeneas refuses to leave Carthage. As a consequence, the epic cannot resume meaningfully without a change in strategy and a new model for intervention in the face of the failure to oscillate between trickster and herald. To pivot, in his third intervention Mercury imposes his authority over the direction of the epic narrative by moving the site of his intervention to a kind of a para-diegetic space, free from Jupiter's Apolline mandate and *Fama*'s Dionysiac imposition. The consideration of the dream space in *Aeneid* 4 from the perspective of agential-realism as laid out by Barad assuages long standing frustrations with the veracity of the scene and challenges the critical record that prefers to allegorize the figure of Mercury. Barad's argument about the infinite malleability of nature in their work on transmaterialities mirrors Mercury's governance of the dream space or *nusquam* ("nowhere") and it provides a model for thinking about how the epic text fragments any single source of narrative authority within the text. Consequently, the *nusquam*, just like Barad's conception of the void, is not beholden to a single prescriptive view or the Apolline imposition of a greater design, nor is it a Dionysiac mesh

of dissolving boundaries. The *nusquam* allows Mercury to avoid the stasis that freezes his grandfather Atlas by demonstrating that there is a productive and authoritative application of lying, which the Mercurial figure regulates independently.

Delay and Ambiguity

So long as Aeneas is stuck in place, the shadow of Atlas' failure looms large over the preceding in Carthage given that Mercury's ability to extricate himself from the compounded failures of his first two interventions is wrapped up in Aeneas' mission. In order to execute his third and final intervention, Mercury must respond to Aeneas' delay in Book 4 and adapt his strategy to match the ambiguity of the situation. Mercury's new interventionist ploy fills the gap in the narrative that Aeneas' inaction creates while the hero equivocates on the shores of Carthage. Although the larger narrative begins to buckle under the weight of the rampant Dionysiac speech that Fama's descent unleashes at the beginning of Book 4, Aeneas is in no hurry to leave Carthage even after Mercury delivers Jupiter's mandate that he set sail for Italy. Despite Aeneas' insistence to Dido that he is resolved to leave, he nonetheless delays his departure from Carthage for an indefinite amount of time.[239]As the following lines insinuate, Aeneas lacks any urgency to depart: *Aeneas celsa in puppi iam certus eundi / carpebat somnos rebus iam rite paratis* ("Now that everything was ready, and he was resolved on going, Aeneas was snatching some sleep, on the ship's high stern" *Aen*.4.554-555). The ablative absolute *rebus…paratis* ("with everything having been prepared/arranged") reveals that any material obstacle to his journey remains firmly in the past. Nevertheless, Aeneas takes time to sleep restfully. Compounding the issue, in the time between Mercury's visits, Aeneas has had multiple

[239] See Fratantuono 2022, 301.

arguments with Dido, who herself has been able to prepare her own funeral pyre. It is this very lack of urgency that compels Mercury to appear once more in Aeneas' dream to deliver his final directive, since Aeneas makes only a halfhearted attempt to heed the messenger's previous command. In Aeneas' lack of urgency, it is possible to read his actions as either defiant of the gods or cautious and measured, so in order to harness the ambiguity of Aeneas' intentions, Mercury moves the site of his intervention to the space of the dream in which ambiguity reigns.

Mercury takes advantage of Aeneas' indecision by assuming for himself the title of the god of sleep and excoriating the delaying hero in the liminal zone of his dream.[240] Although he carries the caduceus with him during his earlier descent to Carthage, that *virga* which gives out sleep, Mercury finally has cause to use it here when his usual methods of persuasion have failed. While sleeping, Aeneas encounters a figure similar to Mercury, who warns the epic hero that he is in imminent danger from a fickle and angry Dido:

> huic se forma dei vultu redeuntis eodem
> obtulit in somnis rursusque ita visa monere est,
> omnia Mercurio similis, vocemque coloremque
> et crinis flavos et membra decora iuventa:
> 'nate dea, potes hoc sub casu ducere somnos,
> nec quae te circum stent deinde pericula cernis,
> demens, nec Zephyros audis spirare secundos?
> illa dolos dirumque nefas in pectore versat
> certa mori, variosque irarum concitat aestus.
> non fugis hinc praeceps, dum praecipitare potestas?
> iam mare turbari trabibus saevasque videbis
> conlucere faces, iam fervere litora flammis,
> si te his attigerit terris Aurora morantem.
> heia age, rumpe moras. varium et mutabile semper
> femina.' sic fatus nocti se immiscuit atrae
>
> ("That vision appeared again in dream admonishing him,
> similar to Mercury in every way, voice and colouring,
> golden hair, and youth's graceful limbs:

[240] Fratantuono observes that "Mercury's visit at 259ff. had been a diurnal apparition; this is its nocturnal counterpart...The god appears to him in his sleep, invading the nocturnal world between sleeping and waking" Fratantuono 2022, 786.

> "Son of the Goddess, can you consider sleep in this disaster,
> can't you see the danger of it that surrounds you, madman
> or hear the favourable west winds blowing?
> Determined to die, she broods on mortal deceit and sin,
> and is tossed about on anger's volatile flood.
> Won't you flee from here, in haste, while you can hasten?
> Soon you'll see the water crowded with ships,
> cruel firebrands burning, soon the shore will rage with flame,
> if the Dawn finds you lingering in these lands. Come, now,
> end your delay! Woman is ever fickle and changeable."
> So he spoke, and blended with night's darkness" *Aen*.4.556-570).

The ambiguity of passage above presents numerous challenges to any single reading of Book 4. For example, Mercury both is and is not present as the text invokes his name even as it suggests that it is merely his *forma* that appears before Aeneas' eyes. Additionally, though we have been given no clue as to Mercury's appearance in his previous interventions, Aeneas is able to identify the heavenly messenger by his physical features. Finally, Mercury insists that Dido means to do violence to Aeneas and his people, despite the fact that the reader knows that she means only to harm herself. Early critiques of the dream use these ambiguities to dismiss the episode entirely. Our earliest surviving commentary by the fourth century CE critic, Servius, evidences that the dream sequence was difficult to gauge even for a near contemporary Roman audience due to this ambiguity. Servius' line reading of 4.558, **[557] VISA MONERE EST** *bene uisa; non enim re uera est* ("**SEEMED TO ADMONISH HIM** and "seemed" is well said: for it is not in fact true"),[241] signals an unwillingness to confront the implications that Mercury would need to deliver the same directive multiple times. Servius notes that the intervening figure, *omnia Mercurio similis* ("similar to Mercury in every way,") is just that, a figure that resembles, but is not in fact a god. According to Servius,

[241] Servius, Christopher Michael McDonough, Richard E. Prior, Mark Stansbury, and Virgil, *Servius' Commentary on Book Four of Virgil's Aeneid: An Annotated Translation*, (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2018): 119.

> **[556] FORMA DEI** bene non 'deus', sed 'forma': raro enim numina sicut sunt possunt videri, unde et sequitur 'vultu redeuntis eodem': nam licet 'redeuntis' dicat, id est eius qui possit agnosci, tamen non 'faciem' dicit, sed 'vultum', qui potest saepe mutari.
>
> ("**THE APPEARANCE OF THE GOD** fittingly not the god, but rather the appearance; for divinities can rarely be seen just as they are. So it follows, "returning with the same aspect"; for although he says "[of the god] returning," i.e. of one who can be known, nevertheless he does not say "face" but "appearance," which often can be changed").[242]

However, it is unclear if Servius is claiming that the *forma* of Mercury is or is not a genuine intervention. Is the *forma* of Mercury an approximation of the figure who had visited Aeneas earlier because Aeneas is incapable of seeing the otherworldly god's true form, or is the *forma* a figment of his imagination? Despite the fact that multiple scholars have shown that Mercury's first admonition in Book 4 lacks any epiphany or attempt at deception, a long line of critical readings of the episode err on the side of the second reading.[243] Many interpretations of the dream have written Mercury out of the story by dismissing the veracity of the appearance.[244] Rather than dismiss the dream out of hand because of the ambiguous language, we should be considering how that ambiguity informs the content of the message and the end of the first half of the poem. Complaints from the critical reception of the dream, in debating its veracity miss the point; the dream space is where Mercury demonstrates that the conventions of time and space do not match those within the general diegesis. Using Barad's theories, we can begin to diagram the ways in which ambiguity is a central feature of Mercury's new interventionist strategy. The power to govern sleep is not a feature of Hermes' *timai* in archaic Greek *epos,* so its deployment here marks a significant shift in the balance between Mercury's Apolline herald and Dionysiac

[242] McDonough 2018, 117.

[243] For a catalog of these kinds of readings, see J. Ward Jones, "*Aeneid* 4.238-278 and the Persistence of an Allegorical Interpretation," *Vergilius,* vol. 33, (1987): 29–37.

[244] For a summary of readings that render Mercury a manifestation of Aeneas' guilty conscience, see Fratantuono's notes on line 556 from Fratantuono 2023, 786.

trickster.[245] Nietzsche ascribes the space of the dream to Apollo and the imaginative faculties, however, the use of deception and the blurring of identity in Mercury's dream space complicates our ability to ascribe a simple Nietzschean nature to the dream space in this episode. That the ambiguity proves more successful than the previous two interventions reveals that uncertainty itself is essential to the resumption of the plot.

The True Lie

Unlike the previous two episodes, which share a number of Homeric intertexts, the third intervention represents a novel solution to the problem of Hermes' inability to oscillate effectively or productively between his Dionysiac or Apolline roles from archaic Greek epic; when making his case to Aeneas in the space of the dream, he lies.[246] What distinguishes the lies in the dream space from *Fama*'s unproductive Dionysiac language is that the lie represents a possible narrative outcome that runs parallel to the main body of the epic. Mercury's lies in the dream space activate alternative possibilities in a similar fashion to what Karen Barad calls transmaterialities. Barad's work on quantum mechanics reveals that seemingly stable natural paradigms are in constant flux.

Mercury operates as the ancient textual application of Barad's theory insofar as his regulation of speech relies upon the understanding that in the dream space, lies represent the activation of infinite possible outcomes. The dream space, as a liminal void free from the influence of other gods, is able to mobilize the lie in service of the larger narratological goals of

[245] For more information about Mercury's sleep giving wand, see Feeney 1998, 113.

[246] For further reading on the issue of the lie, see footnote 2 of Muse 2023, 232. Ultimately, "[Mercury's] claim that Dido is contemplating deceptions and a terrible crime is true only in the sense that she has deceived Anna about the purpose of the pyre and is now bent on suicide," Muse 2023, 236. See also James J. O'Hara, *Vergil. Aeneid Book 4. Focus Vergil Aeneid commentaries*, (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2011): 81.

the epic because, under Mercury's direction, it adheres to Karen Barad's understanding of quantum field theory. According to Barad, "quantum physics tells us that the void is an endless exploration of all possible couplings of virtual particles, a 'scene of wild activities.'"[247] From this view, all material particles are "virtual" in that

> Virtual particles are not present (and not absent), but they are material. In fact, most of what matter is, is virtual. Virtual particles do not traffic in a metaphysics of presence. They do not exist in space and time. They are ghostly non/existences that teeter on the edge of the infinitely fine blade between being and nonbeing. Virtuality is admittedly difficult to grasp. Indeed, this is its very nature.[248]

What distinguishes a particle moment to moment is not a shared objective reality, but the selection process of the observer who determines the state of a given particle in the exact moment of its observation.[249] Obviously, this theory puts a great deal of power into the hands of the observer who is an active participant in the shaping of reality through its ability to measure or read a state of nature. Mercury's lie in the dream represents the selection principle of the observer who, having sketched out multiple possibilities within the space of the dream, lands on a single outcome. The gap between Dido and Aeneas and the indeterminate amount of time that transpires between the second and third intervention represent these sorts of quantum fields that can only be transformed into action through Mercury's interpretation of their voids. Without the deployment of this selection principle, the epic would collapse in Book 4.

Mercury's third intervention relies upon the insistence of a lie that Aeneas is in imminent

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[247] Karen Barad, "Transmaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21 (2015): 396.

[248] Barad 2015, 395-396.

[249] "Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world," Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning / Karen Barad,* (N.C: Duke University Press, 2007): 185.

danger from Dido and the Carthaginians, however, it was Mercury's intervention in Book 1 that opened the hearts of the Carthaginians to guarantee Aeneas' safety. If this were not enough, Juno and Venus further bolstered Aeneas' wellbeing by coming to an arrangement at the beginning of Book 4.[250] The *pericula* that are so clear and the *saevas faces* gathering on the shores that Mercury cites do not appear anywhere in the body of the text. Even in a justifiably defiant state, Dido releases Aeneas when he informs her of his dream from Mercury: *neque te teneo neque dicta refello: / i, sequere Italiam ventis, pete regna per undas* ("I do not hold you back, or refute your words: go, seek Italy on the winds, find your kingdom over the waves" *Aen*.4.38-381). Dido only ever sequesters herself from the epic hero after she discovers his plan to leave, thereby removing herself bodily from the conflict.[251] While grieving in her tower, she reiterates her commitment to the Trojan cause: *non ego cum Danais Troianam exscindere gentem* ("I never took the oath, with the Greeks at Aulis, to destroy the Trojan race" *Aen*.4.425). Dido only requests that Aeneas delay his journey and does not dispute that *Iove missus ab ipso / interpres divum fert horrida iussa per auras* ("divine messenger sent by Jove himself carries his orders through the air" *Aen*.4.376-377). When Mercury claims that Dido is a threat, we have only the word of the god of lies, the very same figure who mollified the Carthaginians himself, to corroborate the danger.

The articulation of Mercury's threat relies upon the god of rhetoric's close reading in that his warning to Aeneas is the result of a misleading interpretation of Dido's complaints at the end

[250] Aeneas is doubly protected in *Aeneid* 1: "Virgil thus artfully arranges two divine apparitions in the wake of Jupiter's speech; the father of gods and men sends his messenger, while Venus – no doubt not entirely soothed and at ease in the wake of Jupiter's address – takes matters into her own hands and descends to earth," Fratantuono 2015, 296.

[251] In her despair, Dido turns any violent impulse inward and it is only in response to Aeneas' apparent betrayal: "Dido's defenders will reply that her violent thoughts are a response to Aeneas' departure, not a matter of premeditation as Mercury's warning implies," Muse 2023, 236-237.

of Book 4.[252] After pleading with Aeneas to remain in Carthage, Dido swears,

> sequar atris ignibus absens
> et, cum frigida mors anima seduxerit artus,
> omnibus umbra locis adero. dabis, improbe, poenas.
> audiam et haec Manis veniet mihi fama sub imos
>
> ("Absent, I'll follow you with dark fires, and when icy death has divided my soul and body, my ghost will be present everywhere. Cruel one, you'll be punished. I'll hear of it: that news will reach me in the depths of Hades" *Aen*.4.384-387).

Here we find the smoking gun, the *ignibus* ("fires"), that will provide the basis for Mercury's warning about flames (*flammis*) gathering on the shore.[253] Mercury might have had a point to make here, if Dido's claims were not underpinned by one essential fact, that in her revenge fantasy she will be nowhere near his person, *absens* ("absent"). In fact, in her musings, the only one in mortal danger is Dido, since it is her *umbra* ("ghost or shadow") that will haunt Aeneas after she herself has died. The crux of the passage is a meditation between absence and ubiquity; her complaint ponders how a person can be gone, when they are always in one's thoughts. Her speech is a rhetorical exercise on the nature of longing, and it is the result of poetic license. Dido hopes that, by losing her, Aeneas will suffer emotionally. The black flames that she carries are nothing more than an extension of the traces of the old flame of love (*veteris vestigia flammae, Aen*.4.23) that has been an ever-present representation of Dido's relationship with Aeneas throughout the poem.[254] In his invective against Aeneas, Mercury demands that the figurative

[252] "For the reader sympathetic to Dido's plight, however, who has just seen Dido turn her anger against herself as she resigns herself to death, the god's falsehoods and misogyny, like Athena's, carry the sting of injustice," Muse 2023, 241.

[253] *Aen*.4.567.

[254] Though the traces of her love for Sychaeus that Aeneas rekindles foreshadow her fiery death, love and flame do not necessarily connote foreboding in the *Aeneid* as John Rexine notes, "In the *Aeneid,* fire forms the connecting link from Troy to Rome, from the destructive conflagration of Troy to the eternal flame of the Vestal Virgins. In its positive aspect this fire is the symbol of the eternity of Rome; it is a creative fire which has no fixed limitation," John Rexine, "Fire Symbolism in the *Aeneid*," *The Classical Outlook* 39, no. 1 (1961): 1. For a more recent analysis of the symbol of fire and its transformative

fire be read literally as he appears in Aeneas' dream. Mercury misrepresents Dido's prayer for revenge by bringing the distance of Dido's threat right to Aeneas's face, as we have seen with his choice of language. The god of rhetoric and eloquence engages in close reading in bad faith. The god of nuance undermines a metaphor and convinces Aeneas that Dido is incapable of subtext or poetic license. Dido's revenge not only lies in absence, but in language, since the culmination of fantasy is the knowledge that she will hear the *fama* of Aeneas' suffering in the underworld.[255] Unfortunately for Dido, the god of language has the final say in her relationship.

Though both *Fama* and Mercury share the power to reshape or recontextualize characters' intentions by mixing lies with the truth, Mercury's lies supplement the fulfillment of the narrative even as he claims authority over the epic through his improvisations.[256] In Mercury's speech in the dream space *ignibus* become *saevas faces*, figurative language becomes a threat, and absence becomes pressing danger. However, unlike *Fama*, whose directive is ambiguous and whose purpose is chaos, Mercury's manipulation is in service of the larger plot and works to correct the overwhelming stasis that *Fama*'s actions foment. In other words, Mercury's lie is in service of productivity with a view to the greater Apolline shape of the epic form. To avoid the collapse of the narrative, Mercury invents the necessary evidence to move the plot along, independent of his father's directives, supplanting Jupiter as the prime mover within the epic as the ultimate editorial force in the poem.

Dream Space as *nusquam*

properties in the *Aeneid*, see Stephen Scully, "Refining Fire in *Aeneid* 8," *Vergilius (1959-)* 46 (2000): 93–113.

[255] *Aen*.4.387.

[256] *Aen*.4.188

Mercury's third intervention works to correct his previous two failures by creating a liminal space, which I identify as the *nusquam* ("nowhere") that runs parallel to the primary diegesis of the epic in the form of a dream. The special nature of this dream space, which operates alongside the primary diegesis as a kind of paratext, is what allows Mercury to overcome stasis and redirect Aeneas successfully by means of the lie. This is only possible because the nature of the dream allows for the oscillation between Apolline and Dionysiac speech to happen instantaneously and repeatedly. Using Barad's theory of transmateriality reveals that Mercury, as a god of conversation and negotiation, is able to make space for and to regulate alternative realities within a space of his own making moment to moment without being constrained by other sources of authority. Whereas Barad uses explanations of natural phenomena to diagram the queer nature of the universe, we have Dido's lament, in which she identifies the seemingly paradoxical nature of truth that underpins Aeneas' actions in Book 4 and lays out the terms that inform the *nusquam*.

Just as the universe, in Barad's estimation, is fundamentally queer in that seemingly stable natural phenomena are negotiable, so too is the nature of Mercury's dream space. Barad applies the principle of virtual particles to the question of nature to demonstrate that there is no single natural state to the universe that is not mediated by an observer. Consider, for example, Barad's understanding of the lightning bolt:

> A lightning bolt is not a straightforward resolution of the buildup of a charge difference between the earth and a storm cloud: a lightning bolt does not simply proceed from storm cloud to the earth along a unidirectional (if somewhat erratic) path; rather, flirtations alight here and there and now and again as stepped leaders and positive streamers gesture toward possible forms of connection to come. The path that lightning takes not only is not predictable but does not make its way according to some continuous unidirectional path between sky and ground. Though far from microscopic in scale, it seems that we are witnessing a quantum form of communication—a process of iterative intra-activity.[257]

[257] Barad 2015, 398.

To Barad, the lightning bolt itself is a negotiation, with no clear beginning or end and it certainly has no one observable vector either up or down. Importantly, Barad describes this process in terms of language in that the negotiation is a "conversation" more than a single event, but a process of call and response. If, as Barad argues, there is no state that is not a process of negotiation on a subatomic level, then the nature of nature itself rejects simple binaries.

Mercury's intervention in the dream space stages the same negotiation of reality from Barad's theory of the universe through his rewriting of the text in the dream space. To the god of communication, the lie is not a problem because it represents just one of many negotiable outcomes that do not have a firm shape until Mercury activates them and incorporates them into the narrative. As we have seen with the transformation of Dido's funerary preparations through Mercury's translation in the dream space, Dido's intent is less important than the potential impact her actions could have. It is Mercury who reads the text on Aeneas' behalf, and his reading is authoritative.

Mercury's freedom to negotiate in the dream space comes from the fact that it transpires outside the bounds of the larger diegesis. He is *similis* to, but ultimately different from, a messenger or trickster because he is an author in his own right. Servius' impulse to reject the veracity of the dream is owed in part to the fact that the dream does not adhere to the same narratological logic as the rest of Book 4. This is due in part to the fact that, isolated from the crowded landscape of the waking world, in which multiple interventionists such as *Fama*, Iris, and Cupid are imposing competing strategies on the narrative, Mercury is free to rewrite the terms of Dido and Aeneas' relationship. If a paratext according to Gérard Genette is "the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public," then it is the Mercurial dream space that establishes the limits of

Aeneas' relationship and reasserts the stakes of the hero's mission for the larger diegesis.[258] The dream serves as a supplement to the primary action by providing a theoretical model by which to consider the text at large.

It is in Dido's speech to Aeneas that her relationship to truth and language outlines the nature of the dreamspace that Mercury governs and gives that place the name of *nusquam*. In Dido's lament, the issues of space, language, and truth collide at the site of the dream. After Aeneas reports to Dido that he had been visited in person by Mercury and ordered to leave Carthage, Dido accosts the hero as a deceiver (*perfide*) and oath breaker. In her complaint, she considers how rumor will ultimately avenge the wrong that Aeneas has done to her. Knowing that *Fama* will report to her, across great distance, concerning Aeneas' torment brings Dido a measure of peace: *dabis, improbe, poenas*. / *audiam et haec Manis veniet mihi fama sub imos* ("Cruel one, you'll be punished. I'll hear of it: that news will reach me in the depths of Hades" *Aen.*4.386-387). While *Fama* is a source of anxiety for Dido, it is also the vehicle of her revenge on Aeneas.[259] Dido indulges in an alternate reality in which the source of her pain is now an ally and agent who works on her behalf. Dido's confident declaration that *fama* will render her service might seem ironic given that *Fama* has run rampant throughout Book 4 and driven Iarbas to petition the gods for his own vengeance against her, however, this apparent incongruity makes sense in light of how she frames her complaint. Just a few lines earlier, Dido says,

> nusquam tuta fides. eiectum litore, egentem
> excepi et regni demens in parte locavi.
> amissam classem, socios a morte reduxi
> (heu furiis incensa feror!): nunc augur Apollo,
> nunc Lyciae sortes, nunc et Iove missus ab ipso

[258] Genette, Gérard, and Marie Maclean. "Introduction to the Paratext." *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 261.

[259] See Hardie 2012, 97-98 for more information on Dido's desire to appropriate the rumors that lead to her death as a vehicle for revenge.

> interpres divum fert horrida iussa per auras
>
> ("Nowhere is truth safe. I welcomed him as a castaway on the shore, a beggar, and foolishly gave away a part of my kingdom: I saved his lost fleet, and his friends from death. Ah! Driven by the Furies, I burn: now prophetic Apollo, now the Lycian oracles, now even a divine messenger sent by Jove himself carries his orders through the air" Aen.4.373-378).

Dido's declaration at the beginning of the passage above betrays the nature of the lie within the context of the dream and intervention. Dido remarks to Aeneas before his departure: *nusquam tuta fides* ("Nowhere is truth safe" *Aen*.4.373). The most basic meaning of *nusquam* (*ne* + *usquam*) is "in no place, nowhere," but with a form of *esse* (which is gapped here in this short clause) can also mean "**a** to have no being anywhere, be non-existent. **b** to be dead or perished; also to be forgotten."[260] In the passage above, we have both meanings operating simultaneously. Not only does Dido declare that *fides* (trust, loyalty, promise, assurance, honesty, etc.) has no physical place in Book 4, she makes it clear that *fides* belongs to liminality and death, which fall under Mercury's *timai*.

Dido's speech hierarchizes the influence of the competing sources of authority in Book 4 in her list of grievances. Dido identifies the tension between *Fama*'s unbridled Dionysiac language, Apollo's *sortes* ("prophecy"), and Mercury's role as the mediator or interpreter (*interpres*) of Jupiter's directive as she provides a list of Aeneas' reasons for his departure. Dido burns (*incensa*) on account of the Furies and the miscommunications that the Dionysiac *Fama* instigates. But not even the Apolline arbiters of justice and prophecy can corroborate Dido's interpretation of the truth as they join the list of intermediaries who further the deception. In that list, though Dido only allows him the title of *missus* ("messenger"), Mercury gets the last word, suggesting that the ultimate responsibility lies with the messenger god. Though her declaration

[260] According to Oxford Latin Dictionary 1968, 1207.

that truth only exists in the *nusquam* reflects her exasperation to find a site where Jupiter's authority can work in concert with *Fama*'s destructive impulses, Mercury will prove that such a place does exist in the form of the dream space.

Dido's words provide the blueprint to think about the Mercurial model of intervention in that seemingly contradictory statements coexist at the site of the dream, which fulfills Dido's expectations about the *nusquam*. In her speech, Dido considers how she can be punished for receiving (*excepi*) a refugee in need, for saving (*reduxi*) his people from death, and for sharing political power with him. By invoking Apollo and Jupiter in her complaint, Dido suggests that the cosmological authorities are complicit in unjust acts, thereby challenging the very definition of *fides*. Dido renders a portrait of an unjust world presided over by the gods of justice. In her speech, Dido considers whether there is a viable alternate space for her, free from the truth and the meddling of the gods in the paradiegetic space of the *nusquam*. Unfortunately for Dido, Mercury the *interpres* of the truth and the governor of the *nusquam* is also the psychopomp and dealer of death. The *nusquam* is a place insofar as it is a counter-space, an alternative to physical space where the truth does exist, but only under Mercury's guidance and subject to his mediation. The dream is the source of divine mandate and the ultimate "truth," but that truth only manifests through the lie. If we can localize the *nusquam*, it reshapes Dido's quote insofar as the truth is safe, but it is just in an imagined side space presided over by the god of language.[261]

[261] My inclination to situate the nowhere space of the dream is not unlike Hardie's placement of *Fama* in the underworld. Hardie argues that ghosts may be resurrected in the telling and retelling of their stories when their fame is resurrected from the underworld: "The underworld, here through a very personal connection, is the repository of true *fama*, but only within the fiction of the *Aeneid*: there are of course other versions of what happened to Dido…The boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead is a permeable one when it comes to *fama*: the fame of a great individual lives on after death; the tradition that preserves the famous deeds of the great dead can be imagined in spatial terms as a place of the dead whose ghosts can be revived through new texts and new readings," Hardie 2012, 98.

The Mercurial turn in *Aeneid* 4 is the moment when the oscillating Homeric binary of Hermes fragments into an infinite number of shards and parallel paths.[262] It makes text of subtext through the foundation of a para-diegetic space immune to the expectations of Jupiter, the fates, or the reader/audience. Within the dream, Mercury is able to seize control away from the Dionysiac language that threatens the completion of Aeneas' fate, but he also defies the pure semblance of the Apolline hierarchy that failed to rescue the narrative previously. Aeneas' dream stages for us the principle of agential-realism in ancient epic textually, whereby the observer of the phenomenon is the ultimate author of reality since the void of the dream itself is queer by nature and defies the notion of simple binaries. Using this principle and applying it to questions of space and deception reveals that the truth within the paradiegetic space of the dream is also in constant flux and subject to the regulation of the Mercurial figure moment to moment. Therefore, information that is seemingly contradictory or ambiguous can be taken as an empirical reality in Mercury's hands.

Appropriation of the *mare* and *crinis flavos* in the *nusquam*

The properties of the dream space disrupt the simple gendered pairing of *Fama*/Mercury or Mercury/Iris and to show how Mercury is a queer subject operating in queer space.[263] This

[262] I echo Thomas Van Nortwick's position that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* ponder alternate worlds, but I argue for a drastic expansion of the idea in my analysis of the Vergilian *nusquam*. Van Nortwick, in the spirit of Milman Parry's identification of the competing pro and anti-Augustan readings of the *Aeneid*, considers how the contradictory nature of heroism in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* confronts the audience with multiple interpretations: "Because Achilles can absorb experience and reflect its power within himself, the alternate world that emerges, however fleetingly, in his exchange with Priam, can come to life inside him. Odysseus, as hero of Athena's rigidly bounded return plot, cannot let other realities in and cannot empathize with the sufferings of others. But the poet makes room for these glimpses into other worlds through the alternate personae that Odysseus inhabits, and the truths that they convey are no less compelling," Van Nortwick, Thomas. "Alternate Worlds in Homeric Epic." *The Classical World* 98, no. 4 (2005): 432-433.

[263] I take issue with the inclination of critics to formulate a simple gendered dichotomy between the feminine *Fama* and the masculine Mercury given that both gods, in their appearance and *timai* refuse to

reality comes into clear focus when we consider how, within the space of the *nusquam*, Mercury reframes the symbols of the *mare* ("sea") and Dido's *crinis flavos* ("tawny hair") to service his claim that Dido represents an imminent threat to Aeneas. These two symbols represent multiple outcomes/directions for the narrative, and it is only through the lie that the Mercurial figure is able to impose order on the narrative that is collapsing under the weight of Dionysiac language. By bringing the landscape more clearly into focus alongside the danger, Mercury misleads Aeneas into believing that Rome, his mission, and the violence he faces are closer than they appear in the waking world. To accomplish his task, Mercury mischaracterizes Dido's feelings of vengeance and conflates her harmless hair with the demonstrably dangerous waters; the ancient Roman audience knows that Aeneas will drown according to popular folk tradition and that Dido means him no harm.[264] Within the *nusquam*, binaries do not exist and Mercury is the ancient mechanism that activates the principles of Barad's agential-realism in an ancient epic context turning lies into quantum possibilities. It reveals that the *nusquam* is a queer space where categories are not fixed until the Mercurial figure authors an outcome.

The representation of the symbol of the *mare* ("sea") within the *nusquam* demonstrates how Mercury transforms a persistent feature of the epic landscape to service his own reading.

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conform to a single expression or shape. Mercury is of course, the god of ambiguity and as for *Fama*, "it is very difficult to form a distinct mental image of her physical shape, subject to rapid and extreme change in size (176—7), walking and flying, apparently at the same time (180), and given more specific form through an indefinite multiplication of body parts which normally occur singly or in groups of two to give a recognizable Gestalt to a body," Hardie 2012, 81-82. For a summary of previous attempts to read the pair in terms of a gendered binary, see Feeney 1998, 109-110. For a recent analysis that disrupts a gendered reading of the *Aeneid* as a conflict between the masculine authority of Jupiter and the feminine irrationality of Juno, see Julia Hejduk, "Jupiter's *Aeneid*: *Fama* and *Imperium*," *Classical Antiquity* 28, no. 2 (2009): 279–327.

[264] For an in-depth analysis of Aeneas' relationship to water (in particular, the Tiber river that will eventually claim his life) and the folk traditions with which a contemporary audience would have been familiar, see Chapter 2, "Tiber and Numicus," of Julia Dyson *King of the Wood: the Sacrificial Victor in Virgil's "Aeneid,"* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2001).

Despite the ambiguity of his appearance, Mercury's relationship to spatial descriptions becomes more specific and more grounded in tactile language within the *nusquam*, most notably in regard to the ocean. Although Gregory Hutchinson argues that the sea in the first half of the poem is a non-human and uniform space, Mercury's relationship to it is in flux until his final appearance.[265] The passages in which Mercury appears mention the sea metonymically or through euphemism and never directly. Mercury skirts the shoes (*oris*) or flies above crashing waves (*undas*) over the level plain (*aequora*).[266] When Mercury is the furthest, conceptually, from his goal in Book 1, the ocean reflects the distance between success and failure. The ocean begins as a source of unfathomable instability and anxiety. When Mercury first descends from Olympos, he crosses the deep (*altum*). Though he has bridged the gap between heaven and the earth, the description of the sea as a deep void suggests that he still has further to travel. When he arrives in Carthage, the ocean is level (*aequora*) as if his task is now clearer, but it is conceptual and not an imminently knowable object. It is still only possible to conceive of the ocean euphemistically.

Mercury reframes Aeneas' relationship to the ocean in the dream space; the dangerous and distant waters that nearly killed him in the proem will now offer the hero a refuge from harm. The ambiguity of *altum* and *aequora* gives way to the word *mare* (ocean).[267] The sea is no

[265] Gregory Hutchinson considers space through the relationship between Turnus and the sea to argue that the sea in the first half of the poem is a non-human and uniform space, Gregory Hutchinson, "Space in the *Aeneid*," in Hans-Christian Günther (ed.) *Virgilian Studies: A Miscellany Dedicated to the Memory of Mario Geymonat (26.1.1941 - 17.2.2012). Studia classica et mediaevalia, Bd 10,* (Nordhausen: Verlag Traugott Bautz, 2015): 252.

[266] In his first two descents *Aen.*1.297-304 and *Aen.*4.238-265.

[267] "*Aequor* is a poetic term, a derivation of the adjective *aequus*, whose primary meaning connotes any form of flat surface. In Republican times, the term was used in a number of figurative senses, moving from 'the flatness of the land' to 'the surface of the sea' and thus coming to mean 'the calm sea," Ruiz

longer an indistinct or vague euphemism. The sea becomes a fixed, identifiable, and stable signifier that Aeneas can see with his own eyes (*videbis*). His goal is now as clear as the language that describes the object. Mercury's use of sensory verbs, *cernis, audis, videbis*, and *attigerit* ("do you see?, do you hear?, you will see, she touches") insist that the danger to Aeneas is as immediately perceptible as the once hostile and distant water is now clearly in focus.

The pressing empirical reality of the water to Aeneas' is clearly at odds with the indistinct nature of the dream. This simple contradiction is a signal that Mercury is appropriating the landscape of the wider diegesis to service his needs. The sea facilitates Mercury's ends and will present no obstacle to the messenger's reframing of the narrative, regardless of the symbol's dangerous association within the wider diegesis; within the *nusquam*, Mercury is capable of ascribing danger, as in the case of Dido, and of dismissing it, as is the case here. This serves as a counterpoint to the figure of Atlas whose body is tethered to the landscape.

Through the symbol of *crinis flavos* ("tawny hair"), we can see how Mercury, in the creation of the *nusquam*, adopts one of Dido's most distinguishing features to recontextualize the threat that the queen poses to Aeneas. In so doing Mercury evidences, bodily, the queer nature of the dream space through the appropriation of a characteristic that the text of the *Aeneid* overwhelming genders as feminine in its application to people. Though the passage above emphatically asserts that the figure in Aeneas' dream is similar in every way to Mercury, there are no actual descriptions of the traits that would distinguish the god, except for the color of his hair. This is bizarre since no physical description of Mercury is to be found earlier in the epic either. Though he has youthful limbs (*membra decora iuventa*), the focus of this vague phrase emphasizes the god's apparent age and does not qualify what it is about his limbs that is

2014, 694. According to H. H. Warwick, *aequora* is the most frequently used term for ocean in the *Aeneid*, followed by *mare*, H. H. Warwick, A Virgil Concordance (Minneapolis, MN, 1975).

youthful. Is this a reference to his body mass index, his complexion, or vascularity, for example? There is no antecedent for which the word *similis*, which so vexes Servius, could refer. The pains taken to authorize the similarity of the figure would require a shared point of reference, but no such corroboration is possible in the text, from either the perspective of Aeneas or the audience. We know that Aeneas put eyes on Mercury, but we do not know what he saw: *ipse deum manifesto in lumine vidi intrantem muros vocemque his auribus hausi* ("I saw the god himself in broad daylight enter the city and these very ears drank of his words" *Aen*.4.358-359). Throughout the poem, the text uses the symbols of his office to distinguish Mercury from the other gods.[268] The only quantifiable clue to Mercury's appearance, that does not reference his attire or symbols of office, is the word *flavus*.[269] The term, *flavus*, appears rarely in the text and in only three contexts.[270] *Flavus* can refer to natural features such as fields or bodies of water.[271] It can also refer to objects of monetary value, such as prizes awarded for funerary games.[272] Finally, *flavus* can refer to people who experience or are made subject to pitiable death. Only three figures other than Mercury are *flavus*: queen Dido, the Latin soldier Clytius (a soldier killed by the Trojans in Book 10),[273] and Aeneas' future wife, Lavinia, in Book 12 when she learns that

[268] From his winged sandals to his wand. For more information about the ambiguity of his physical appearance, see Feeney 1998, 120-121.

[269] *flavus* 1. Yellow (esp. pale yellow or golden), 2. Having the hair (or beard) yellow, fair-haired, blonde, Oxford Latin Dictionary 1968, 711.

[270] Fratantuono 2022, 789.

[271] For example, it describes the *harena* ("sand") of the Tiber at *Aen*.7.31; the fields of Lycia are *flaventibus* (*Aen*.7.721); the *gurgite* ("stream") of the Tiber is *flavo* (*Aen*.9.816).

[272] For example, it describes *auro* ("gold") at *Aen*.1.592 and the prize of *oliva* ("olive oil") at *Aen*.5.309.

[273] *Aen*.10.324.

her mother, Amata, has killed herself.[274] In each of these instances, *flavus* connotes a youthfulness that is cut short or distressed by the touch of death. Importantly, *flavus* only ever modifies an individual once, except for Dido, who has the distinction of being named *flavus* twice in Book 4.[275] The use of *flavus* to reference Mercury in the passage above is the only instance that does not fit the above paradigm.

Mercury insists that Dido represents an emergent threat by appropriating *flavus*, the distinguishing mark of her earthly beauty, and by importing a symbol of his waking world into the dream space. On one level, the linkage between the messenger's hair and Dido's prefigures the lock that Iris cuts when shepherding Dido to the underworld at the end of Book 4.[276] Though Mercury does not suffer a loss as the other tawny human figures do, he does bring about the death of Dido through his actions. Mercury, the psychopomp, wielding his death-dealing caduceus finally has cause to use it at the end of Book 4. Mercury makes Dido a sacrificial object, not unlike a prize of *flava…oliva* ("tawny… olive oil" *Aen*.5.309), whose death is as natural as a field of grain and as pitiable as the death of Amata. On another level, the focus on Mercury's *crinis flavos* during an episode concerned with the imminent danger posed by the most prominent tawny figure in the whole of the poem authorizes Mercury's threat by bringing it right before Aeneas's eyes, just as the sea comes into focus. Mercury's invasion in the guise of Dido's symbol demonstrates the immediacy and magnitude of Dido's penetration into Aeneas' innermost thoughts. Just as the ocean and Dido's hair penetrate his thoughts, so too does Aurora

[274] *Aen*.12.605.

[275] When Dido complains to Jupiter that Aeneas is leaving Carthage, she does so *flaventisque abscissa comas* ("tearing at her golden hair" *Aen*.4.590). After her death, Iris carries Dido's *flavum…crinem* to the underworld (*Aen*.4.698).

[276] Dido's golden hair: *nondum illi flavum Proserpina vertice crinem / abstulerat* ("Proserpine had not yet taken a lock of golden hair from her head" *Aen*.4.698-699).

physically reach out and touch him (*attigerit*) in his delay (*morantem*), bringing the heavens to the earth in the same manner as Mercury's intervention.

Appropriation of the landscape and Dido's distinguishing characteristic that authors the lie which will ultimately succeed in staving off stasis in the *Aeneid*, and not the devotion to any one pole of Hermes'/Mercury's epic *timai*. In this appropriation, Mercury oscillates between genders as well as the Nietzschean poles in the same manner that the nature of the landscape of the *nusquam* represents an array of queer possibilities. To make his case, Mercury relies upon the true lie through the appropriation of two symbols: hair and the sea. The manipulation of both symbols demonstrates how the messenger recontextualizes the lie in service of the narrative within the *nusquam* operates in the space of the *nusquam*. Through these symbols we see how a virtual or imaginative state of being can transform moment to moment depending on the perspective of Mercury as the observer (to use Barad's terminology). Mercury ultimately succeeds in the *nusquam* by queering not only his body, but the landscape itself in the fraught symbol of the sea.

The Branching *nusquam*: Dido's Dream

Though Mercury acts as a kind of observer who selects a single outcome for the narrative, it is important to remember that, within the space of the Mercurial dream, multiple parallel paths persist and present alternative outcomes simultaneously. Mercury's appropriation of Dido's characteristic *crinis flavos* ("tawny hair") and his manipulation of Aeneas' perception in the dream space in service of Jupiter's prophecy relies upon the threat of one such alternate outcome. Dido's own dream, which comes just before Aeneas' encounter with Mercury, constitutes an alternative that positions Dido as the protagonist of her own epic narrative. A comparison between the two dreams reveals that Dido's imagination of an alternate epic space is

not distinct from, but an extension of Mercury's third appearance in his capacity as a god of sleep. Mercury's responsibility for instigating this alternate narrative reveals that the Mercurial figure engineers his own evidence to prove that Dido is an imminent danger.

Dido's dream in Book 4 (lines 460-473), which foreshadows her tragic end, represents one alternate epic space among the infinite possibilities of the multifarious *nusquam* by staging Aeneas' own epic journey in miniature. It only becomes clear, retroactively, that Dido's dreams originate from the wielder of the caduceus who *dat somnos* ("gives out sleep" *Aen*.1.244) to unsuspecting mortals when the passage is considered alongside Aeneas' dream. Both dreams are characterized by a central lie, which operates in the same fashion and sets the stage for the violent uncoupling of the king and queen. Despondent about Aeneas' departure, Dido visits the shrine of her former husband, Sychaeus. Outside the tomb,

> hinc exaudiri voces et verba vocantis
> visa viri, nox cum terras obscura teneret,
> solaque culminibus ferali carmine bubo
> saepe queri et longas in fletum ducere voces;
> multaque praeterea vatum praedicta priorum
> terribili monitu horrificant. agit ipse furentem
> in somnis ferus Aeneas, semperque relinqui
> sola sibi, semper longam incomitata videtur
> ire viam et Tyrios deserta quaerere terra,
> Eumenidum veluti demens videt agmina Pentheus
> et solem geminum et duplices se ostendere Thebas,
> aut Agamemnonius scaenis agitatus Orestes,
> armatam facibus matrem et serpentibus atris
> cum fugit ultricesque sedent in limine Dirae.
>
> ("from it she seemed to hear voices and her husband's words calling her, when dark night gripped the earth: and the lonely owl on the roofs often grieved with ill-omened cries, drawing out its long call in a lament: and many a prophecy of the ancient seers terrified her with its dreadful warning. Harsh Aeneas himself persecuted her, in her crazed sleep: always she was forsaken, alone with herself, always she seemed to be traveling companionless on some long journey, seeking her Tyrian people in a deserted landscape: like Pentheus, deranged, seeing the Furies file past, and twin suns and a twin Thebes revealed to view, or like Agamemnon's son Orestes driven across the stage when he flees

his mother's ghost armed with firebrands and black snakes, while the avenging Furies crouch on the threshold" *Aen*.4.460-473).

The passage above operates as a nexus of the same concerns in Mercury's interventions. The extraordinary alliteration of "v" in the first two lines of the passage puts the focus on the relationship between the man (*viri*), language (*verba*), and the indistinct nature of the visions (*visa*). Like Aeneas' dream, this passage is rife with verbs related to sensory experience, however the emphasis is on seeing, hearing, and speaking. The pesky *visa* ("seemed") appears here again, just as it does when Mercury visits Aeneas in his sleep at *Aen*.4.557. Servius insists that the use of *visa* is appropriate given that the visions are not real (*non enim erant vera*).[277] So what are these visions of ghosts that terrify Dido in her sleep? When compared to Aeneas' dream, it becomes clear that these visions are not manifestations of Dido's anxious imagination, but originate from Mercury, the *Aeneid*'s closest figure to a god of sleep.[278] Aeneas seems (*videtur*) to terrorize her in her sleep (*in somnis*) as she, and not Aeneas, wanders the earth (*terra*) in search of her own people. Dido is cast as a wandering founder figure, just like Aeneas. But she is more than another Aeneas, as she is also terrorized by him.

In the world of the *nusquam*, the *ferus* (wild, barbaric) Aeneas figure resembles the Mercury in Aeneas' dream, with whom he has a strong thematic connection as we saw in the first

[277] Servius 2018, 119.

[278] Roland Austin reflects on the relationship between death and sleep in his note on *Aen*.4.244: "Editors have been annoyed because Virgil seems to refer, first to Mercury's power over the dead (242-3), then to his power over the living (*dat somnos adimitque*), then, in this phrase, again to his power over the dead…Too much has been made of this alleged awkwardness: death is too nearly the twin-brother of sleep to make it matter to Virgil whether he gives an orderly catalogue of Mercury's functions or not. But if analysis is necessary, may we not say that in these lines Virgil first describes Mercury's power over the waking dead, then his power over the waking and sleeping living, then his power over the sleeping dead?" Virgil and Roland Austin, P. *Vergili Maronis Aeneidos liber quartus*, (Clarendon Press, 1955): 86. In Austin's apparent frustration with scholars' attempts to parse the subtle differences between giving sleep, opening eyes, and directing dead souls, he reveals that Mercury's *timai* are not fixed even in the logic of the language that represents them here.

two interventions. Just as Mercury adopts Dido's *crinis flavos*, here, he assumes the role of Aeneas for this parallel dream in which Dido, and not Aeneas, is the central protagonist. Just as Mercury's instigation forces Aeneas out of Carthage and sets him on a path to the underworld in Book 6, the *ferus Aeneas* drives Dido to encounter the Furies *in limine* ("on the threshold") of the underworld here. The use of the adjective *ferus* to describe Aeneas here is just as exceptional in the text of the Aeneid as Mercury's appropriation of the *crinis flavos*. Throughout the poem, Aeneas can be *ferox, furens* or *fervidus*, but never *ferus*.[279] At the height of his rage, standing above the defeated Turnus, Aeneas is *furiis accensus et ira* / *terribilis* ("blazing with fury, and terrible in his anger"), but he never loses his mental faculties and is able to translate his rage into a short speech.[280] The adjective *ferus* is typically reserved for animals, barbarian tribes, or the gods.[281] *Ferus* belongs to all categories of the otherworldly or inhuman within the text. The irony

[279] For more information on Aeneas and his anger, see Karl Galinsky whose article on ancient Roman morality argues that Turnus deserved to die by the standard of the first century Roman audience: Galinsky, Karl. "The Anger of Aeneas." *The American Journal of Philology* 109, no. 3 (1988): 321–48. For a less sympathetic reading of Aeneas and the management of his anger, see Michael Putnam's response to Galinsky's article, in which he argues through close reading the text itself that, "Instead of eliciting accolades of praise, Virgil's language should arouse in his readers the deepest suspicions about the ethical quality of his hero's final deed. As Virgil brings his poem to its powerfully inconclusive, brilliantly calculated ending, he allows no light to dawn in his hero's inner vision, to bring illumination after vengeful rage," Putnam, Michael C.J. "Anger, Blindness and Insight in Virgil's Aeneid." *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 23, no. 4 (1990): 39. For a more recent analysis that focuses on Pallas and his relationship to Aeneas, see John Esposito. "Who Kills Turnus? 'Pallas' and What Aeneas Sees, Says and Does in *Aeneid* 12.939–52." *The Classical Journal* 111, no. 4 (2016): 463–81.

[280] Aeneas, standing above Turnus says,

> tune hinc spoliis indute meorum
> eripiare mihi? Pallas te hoc vulnere, Pallas
> immolat et poenam scelerato ex sanguine sumit
>
> ("'Shall you be snatched from my grasp, wearing the spoils
> of one who was my own? Pallas it is, Pallas, who sacrifices you
> with this stroke, and exacts retribution from your guilty blood'" *Aen*.12.947-949).

[281] The following examples reveal a pattern that links *ferus* to the wild, dangerous, and inhuman: In Book 1, Aeneas considers whether the people of North Africa are *ferae* (*Aen*.1.308), which is ironic given that in Book 4 he will prove to be *ferus* himself to Dido; interestingly, Jupiter himself is described as *ferus* at

of the term when applied to Aeneas arises from the fact that his failure in Book 4 is his attachment to Carthage's social institutions; it is passivity, civility, and comfort that threaten Aeneas in Mercury's admonishment of the hero. The violence of the adjective mirrors the violence with which Mercury *invadit* ("attacks") Aeneas and given that Mercury is the closest thing to a god of sleep in *Aeneid* 4 and that Dido's dream briefly precedes Aeneas' dream, it stands to reason that Mercury is responsible for misrepresenting Aeneas to Dido in the same fashion that he misrepresents Dido to Aeneas.

Even though Mercury uses Dido's dream against her, the presentation of an alternate epic narrative makes space for alternative stories within the larger epic diegesis. In the *nusquam* governed by Mercury, Dido can be an epic protagonist in her own right. In the example of Dido's dream, we have a counterexample to the primary action of the diegesis; it is a possibility that the future and the epic outcome are not fixed entirely since all possibilities can reside within the *nusquam* simultaneously until Mercury, as the narratological authority, selects the final outcome. A consequence of reinventing the rules of the epic is that it allows for parallel stories to transpire at the same time just as particles occupy multiple positions at once within a quantum field.

Conclusion

Aen.2.326 on the last day of the Trojan War. Dido laments that she was not able to live in the manner of a wild beast (*more ferae*), free from the marriage that causes her so much pain at *Aen*.4.550-552, just before Mercury arrives for the second time in Book 4; the Sybil's heart is *fera* when she inhales the power of Apollo (*Aen*.6.49); when the Sybil finishes her prophecy, she continues to rage, but Apollo tames her *fera corda* (*Aen*.6.80); Iulus hunts beasts in Book 7 when Alecto drove his dogs to kill the sacred deer (*Aen*.7.475-510; Lycus is like a wild beast (*fera*) in *Aen*.9.551; Carthage is firmly *fera* by Book 10 in opposition to the future of city of Rome when the gods discuss the coming of the Punic Wars (*Aen*.10.10-15).

Mercury's first two interventions stage, in miniature, the failure of Homeric reception to author new narratives. Devotion to Apolline expression comes at a cost of oscillation and the narrative suffers due to Mercury's inability to adapt his *timai* to the emergent needs of his tasks until his final appearance in Aeneas' dream. However, in the absence of a prescriptive Apolline mandate, the narrative does not dissolve into the kind of formless Dionysiac speech that originates from *Fama* in Book 4. The dream space gives a shape to the oscillation of Mercury's *timai* in an isolated para-diegetic space that, like Karen Barad's classification of nature, is a queer space in constant flux. Within the *nusquam*, lies can evidence threats and reshape the outcome of the larger narrative because they are not governed by the dictates of Jupiter or the fates.

Since the *Aeneid* is a poem about the establishment of intergenerational authority through the delineation of physical space, there is nothing less at stake than the creation of historical narratives and the foundation of national/mythological space in Aeneas' decision to leave Carthage. Jupiter tasks Mercury with making these stakes clear to Aeneas and with facilitating his vision for the *translatio* of power in the Mediterranean. As we have seen, the messenger god of archaic Greek *epos,* as either the Dionysiac trickster or Apolline herald, is incapable of authorizing the creation of new traditions or spaces so long as he remains fixed to the expression of only one of his *timai*. The *nusquam* allows Mercury the freedom to oscillate and to complicate the discourse of truth, reality, or space as it is subject to Mercury's continual revision. While Aeneas will put eyes on his future descendants in *Aeneid* 6 when Anchises guides him through the Elysian fields, the Mercurial intervention reifies Rome in the dream space. Empire springs from the *nusquam* insofar as the idea of Rome is only real when it is framed through a lie in the *nusquam*. The Mercurial figure gives a physical location for the founding of Rome, not in Italy,

but in Aeneas' dream, where Mercury rules. Most importantly, the Mercurial intervention demonstrates that the precarity of epic space is not a byproduct of reading practices that privilege a Barthesian textual analysis; precarity and alterity are integral to the epic mode for the *Aeneid* and those works which respond to it for the next two thousand years. The space of Rome and the poetry that reifies it, like the discourse of truth in the *Aeneid*, is contentious, violent, and in flux just as Mercury depicts the relationship between Aeneas and Dido in the *nusquam* of their dreams. To Aeneas, Dido's kingdom represents an escape from the violence of Jupiter's imperial designs and a hypothetical future or a kind of *nusquam*, free of the generational curse that would underpin generations of conflict between Carthage and Rome. What makes this hypothetical future so dangerous is that it is a viable and competitive alternative to Jupiter's plans. Without the staging of the Mercurial intervention to reify the idea of Rome, Dido's parallel *nusquam* as represented by her dream, is just as viable an outcome for the direction of the epic. Mercury's stealthy fourth appearance in Dido's dream mobilizes a nonexistent interpersonal threat to actualize the larger Apolline mission set forth by Jupiter.

The *nusquam* of Mercury's dream is the ancient manifestation of Barad's principle of transmaterialities. It reveals that the logic underpinning intervention is naturally queer in the *Aeneid* and that Mercury is the agent who governs and selects from, at any one time, alternative yet equally plausible outcomes within that space. Outside the bounds of the primary diegesis in the dream space, Mercury is not beholden to deliver Jupiter's mandate, nor is he an agent of chaos whose inclination for boundary stepping distracts him from the achievement of a clear goal. In the dream space, Mercury can embody Dido or Aeneas moment to moment authoritatively because, under his direction, alternate realities can coexist alongside the primary diegesis. Ultimately, if the rules that govern the regulation of stasis and delay are set by the god

of lies in a queer paratextual space, then all authority depicted within the epic project is necessarily fragmented as Mercury's interventions decenter any one Apolline source of order.

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CHAPTER THREE:

The Three Headed Mercury: Locating Alterities in the *Inferno*'s Reception of Mercury

Introduction

The academy does not lack for comparative studies on the *Aeneid* and the *Inferno*. Canto 9, the focus of this Chapter, has also received a great deal of attention. And while the enigmatic interlocutor at the center of the Canto has inspired a number of interpretations, few have considered the implications of the figure's striking similarity to Mercury and Mercury's function in *Aeneid* 4. This Chapter treats the intervention of the unnamed messenger in Canto 8 and 9 through the lens of the Mercurial figure that I outline in Chapter 2, however the identification of Mercury is not just in service of a literary taxonomy; his appearance has massive consequences for situating the source of authority in the epic diegesis. The stakes of outlining the reception of the Mercurial figure in the context of the *Inferno* are monumental because they can help to solve some of the longest standing debates about Dante's relationship to antiquity, Vergil's agency and perceived failures, and the ahistorical accounts of historical or mythological figures.

The *Inferno*'s mobilization of the *Aeneid* establishes that Hell, like Aeneas' dream in *Aeneid* 4, is a *nusquam*, a para-diegetic space governed by the Mercurial figure where all narrative outcomes reside simultaneously. In the case study of the *Inferno*, we find that there are three competing strands of Mercurial speech (or three competing Mercurial figures with their own selection/observation/editing processes/priorities) operating simultaneously in *Inferno* 8 and 9 when stasis threatens to cut the epic short prematurely. The Mercurial figure's intervention fragments authority into multiple strains, and as a result, demonstrates that space in the epic genre allows for endless iteration and countless endings because it is never static; no single

reading of epic poetry is ever possible except when observed in isolation. The Mercurial figure's intervention allows for endless renegotiation of meaning between the *tempo* (time) and *loco* (space) of the diegesis. Mercury teaches the reader how to read and respond to the epic narrative by providing the blueprint for literary intervention.

Three different Mercurial figures in *Inferno* 8 and 9 (Dante, Vergil, and the messenger from heaven (Mercury)) represent three different models of authorial power that operate simultaneously in the text. Rather than repel or subsume each other when they collide in *Inferno* 9, the inscription of the Mercurial figure on the landscape of Hell allows all three models to coexist along parallel vectors simultaneously. This process reveals that the heavenly messenger who facilitates Dante's journey into the city of Dis is not as an angel who imposes a Christianizing and corrective force onto the text, but the Roman Mercury whose arrival affirms the validity of alternative histories or traditions. As intruders and interlocutors, Dante, Vergil, and Mercury are responsible for the governance of the *nusquam* in the *Inferno*–demonstrating that there is no single hegemonic reading that dominates subaltern perspectives. The existence of multiple equally valid vectors of authority demonstrates that alterity is the basis for the creation and regulation of space within the epic diegesis.

1.) Identifying the Messenger from Heaven

Dante's admittance into the city of Dis in Canto 9 relies upon the intervention of an unnamed figure. In Canto 8 of Dante's *Inferno*, after Vergil has guided Dante through Limbo and the minor circles of Hell, *le mura mi parean che ferro fosse* ("the ramparts that seemed to be made of iron" 8.78) at the l'orribil *soglia* ("horrid threshold" 9.92) of the city of Dis bring the

travelers' tour to a standstill.[282] Demon guards stationed at the gates refuse to allow Dante and Vergil entrance to Dis on account of the fact that one of the two companions is still alive.[283] After conferring with Vergil in private, the demons shuffle back inside the city and bar the gates. Consequently, Dante's pilgrimage to heaven "risks being brought to an abrupt halt" before it has really begun in earnest at the conclusion of Canto 8.[284] However, Vergil assures Dante that someone is on the way who will unlock the realm ("*per lui ne fia la terra aperta*" *Inf.*8.130). It is only the intervention of the unnamed figure, *era da ciel messo* ("messenger from heaven" *In*.9.85), in the subsequent Canto that facilitates the forward momentum of the journey and alleviates the danger of narrative stagnation. The identity of the interventionist, like many figures in the Divine Comedy, is elusive.[285] However, scholars offer three possibilities; an unnamed angel, a typological Christ figure, or Hermes/Mercury.

Angel Theory

[282] Italian text and English translation provided by Allen Mandelbaum unless otherwise noted: Dante Alighieri, Allen Mandelbaum, Gabriel Marruzzo, Laury Magnus, and Barry Moser, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri Inferno: A Verse Translation*, (Bantam Classic Reissue. New York: Bantam Books, 2004).

[283] The episode comprises *Inf.*8.88-117.

[284] The problem of stasis here is twofold, as William Franke observes: "The parallel between the progress of Dante and Virgil on their journey through the other world and the progress of the reader's understanding of the poem begins to emerge when, just as Dante and Virgil are threatened with an abortive end to their venture, the narrative itself is interrupted for the first time in the Divine Comedy by a direct address of Dante as poet." William Franke, "Dante's Hermeneutic Rite of Passage: 'Inferno' 9," *Religion & Literature* 26, no. 2 (1994): 1.

[285] L'arrivo del Messo celeste, che è sempre designato in modo indeterminato (un; tal in Inf. VIII.130; altri in Inf. IX.9), getta nello scompiglio l'Inferno: la sua sicurezza è agli antipodi non solo del terrore delle anime, ma anche della titubanza di Virgilio (e di Dante) ("The arrival of the celestial messenger, which is always characterized in an indeterminate way (one such arrival occurs in Inf. VIII.130; and another in Inf.IX.9), throws Hell into turmoil: its security is worlds apart not only from the fear of the souls, but also from the hesitation of Vergil (and of Dante)"), cited from the commentary to *Inferno*, IX.76-81 by Nicola Fosca, (The Dartmouth Dante Project, 2003-2015), as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project.

The most common assumption by scholars, from Boccaccio to Mandelbaum, is that the herald is an unnamed angel. As Nicola Fosca's commentary neatly summarizes,

> Circa l'identificazione del Messo, molto si è discusso (personaggio angelico? biblico? mitologico? Cristo stesso?), anche se la critica odierna pare concordare sulla tesi che egli sia un angelo; del resto, il sintagma da ciel messo (v. 85) è parafrasi di "angelo".
>
> ("Much has been said concerning the identity of the Messenger (is he an angelic figure? Biblical figure? Mythological figure? Christ himself?), even if contemporary critics seem to agree on the premise that he is an angel; concerning the rest, the phrase *da ciel messo* (v. 85) is a definition of the word "angel").[286]

What Fosca makes clear here is that, while there is no clear consensus, the angel theory represents a majority of interpretations. This conclusion draws upon a shallow reading of the following passage in which the herald descends from an undisclosed location. At the beginning of Canto 9, after Vergil reflects upon his previous visit to the city of Dis, he compels Dante to look towards the ancient foam ("*schiuma antica*" *Inf.*9.74) in the distance. The poets see a flying figure covering an impossible distance at incredible speeds and moving through the air over the river Styx with dry soles (*con le piante asciutte*). The herald's presence disrupts the standard operating procedures of Hell as both the scattered souls of the dead (*anime distrutte*) and the landscape itself (*aere grasso*) yield to its presence; whatever power imbues the herald with its authority is recognized in Hell. It is the warping of the environment that leads Dante to declare confidently that *Ben m'accorsi ch'elli era da ciel messo* ("I knew well he was Heaven's messenger"). It is this line that represents the smoking gun of the angel theory.[287]

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[286] Further detail of the various arguments made to support angel theory to follow. Cited from the commentary to *Inferno*, IX.76-81 by Nicola Fosca, (The Dartmouth Dante Project, 2003-2015), as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project, https://Dante.Dartmouth.EDU.

[287] *Inf.*9.76-90. According to Vittorio Sermonti's commentary, *Non e' ragionevole dubitare che sia un angelo, questo inviato del cielo* ("it is not reasonable to doubt that this person, sent from heaven, is an angel"), *L'Inferno Di Dante*, (Milano: Rizzoli, 1988): 133. Robert Hollander's commentary affirms this position and provides a brief summary of recent works that make the same claim that the messenger is an angel: "It seems highly likely that Dante here gives us an archangel Michael 'dressed up' as Mercury, a

However, the language of Dante's observation is less opaque than Mandelbaum's translation would suggest in that *da ciel messo* simply means "messenger from the sky." A quick survey of contemporary English translations of the passage affirms what most scholars take as a given: if it looks like an angel and flies like an angel, it must be an angel.[288] The impulse to make this decision represents the path of least resistance to many popular interpretations of the Canto in general that fit Dante's fear, Vergil's apparent failure, and the messenger's intervention into an allegorical narrative.[289] In these readings, Vergil, the pagan, has no authority except that which he receives through divine grace, and in order for Dante to shed his childish attachment to the pagan past, Vergil must fail so that a corrective Christian force can present him with an alternative. In this way, the angelic figure represents Dante's acknowledgement of the limitations of pagan knowledge and the shape of God's grace in Hell.

Christological Allegory/Holy Spirit

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fused identity that is not problematic in any way, given Dante's practice of combining pagan and Christian materials," cited from the commentary to *Inferno*, IX.76-81 by Robert Hollander, (The Dartmouth Dante Project, 2000-2007), as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project, https://Dante.Dartmouth.EDU.

[288] Henry Longfellow's 1867 English translation of the *Inf*.9.85 refers to the figure as "one sent from Heaven," by making *cielo* ("the sky") a proper noun the translation suggests that the figure belongs to the God of Christianity alone, *Dante Alighieri - The Divine Comedy, Translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "The Darkest Places in Hell Are Reserved for Those Who Maintain Their Neutrality in Times of Moral Crisis,"* (London: Copyright Group, 2017). Allen Mandelbaum records the line as "Heaven's messenger." *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri Inferno: A Verse Translation*. Bantam Classic Reissue, (New York: Bantam Books, 2004). A.S. Kline's translation of "a messenger from Heaven" maintains the same capitalization, D*ante: The Divine Comedy; a complete English translation with in-depth index and notes*, (Poetry In Translation, 2000-2002). John Ciardi takes the biggest liberties with the line by referring to the figure as "a Messenger from God's Throne," *Inferno* (Signet Classics, 2009).

[289] For an examination of Vergil's gradual diminishment throughout the *Commedia*, see George F. Butler, "Statius, Lucan, and Dante's Giants: Virgil's Loss of Authority in Inferno 31," *Quaderni d'italianistica* 24 (2), (2003): 5–21. For an in-depth analysis of Vergil's failure in Canto 8 and 9, see Lloyd H. Howard, 2010. "The Blindness of Virgil in Inferno 8–9, Purgatorio 15–16, and Purgatorio 22–23," in *Virgil the Blind Guide*, (Montreal: MQUP, 2010): 40-69. For a recent study on Dante's assertion of authority over Vergil, see Massimo Verdicchio, "Poetic Authority in Dante and Virgil," *Italica* 94, no. 3 (2017): 413–30.

Related to the angel theory and the reading of the herald's intervention as a corrective gesture is the theory that the messenger is a Christ figure.[290] What is central to these theories is that the allegorical register of the herald is far more important than its diegetic function or its distinguishing features. William Franke, for example, sidesteps the question of the figure's identity to focus on its allegorical resonance to argue that the herald is simply the act of hermeneutics itself wrapped in the veneer of an angel.[291] For Franke, the herald's violent intrusion into the underworld, whose entrance roils the shoreline (*un fracasso d'un suon, pien di spavento, / per cui tremavano amendue le sponde Inf*.9.65-66), and imposes the cosmological order over Dis bears a striking resemblance to the harrowing of Hell.

The typological significance of the intervention is clear; however, the dismissal of the figure's immediate representation puts the cart before the horse. In order for Christ to be signified, we must first have a signifier. It would be a radical notion to suggest that it is Christ himself who disinterestedly clears the way for Dante at this early stage in his journey. Whatever its typological or allegorical valence, the herald makes an appreciably physical intervention in Hell, so what about it is legible to both Dante and to Vergil that calls the harrowing to mind?[292]

Vergil would know better than most that the herald's arrival is a markedly different intervention than the harrowing of Hell, since he himself had witnessed it firsthand shortly after arriving in the underworld, as he relates in Canto 4:

rispuose: «Io era nuovo in questo stato,

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[290] Franke argues that "The figure is transparently an allegorical figure representing some kind of event of grace" and he views the figure's descent as a typological allusion to Christ as it walks on water and reenacts the harrowing of Hell, Franke 1994, 13.

[291] Franke 1994, 11-19.

[292] In Vergil's account of the harrowing of Hell from Canto 4, he recalls Christ arrived *con segno di vittoria coronato* ("crowned with the sign of victory"), but he makes no mention of a key, a wand, or a flying figure, *Inf*.4.52-63

quando ci vidi venire un possente,
con segno di vittoria coronato.

("replied: "I was new—entered on this state
when I beheld a Great Lord enter here;
the crown he wore, a sign of victory" *In*.4.52-54).

What is most notable about Vergil's account is how undynamic it is. Christ *trasseci* (carries them off) and *feceli beati* (makes them blessed), but there is no disruption or violence. There is no descent, directionality, or movement represented in his recounting of events. The only description Vergil provides of the *possente* is that, when he rescued Adam and *altri molti* from Hell, he did so crowned (*coronato*). Conspicuously absent is any wand, key, or stick to bridge this representation of Christ and the herald from Canto 9 in any textual sense.

Boccaccio's commentary on Canto 9 offers a model for thinking through the relationship between the herald's form and its function that is largely compatible with contemporary Christological readings. Boccaccio writes:

> «Giunse alla porta», serrata, «e con una verghetta», la quale nella destra man portava, per la quale si disegna l'uficio del messo e l'autoritá di colui che 'l manda. [E, secondo che i santi vogliono, questo uficio commette Iddio a qualunque s'è di quelle gerarchie celesti, fuorché a' cherubini non si legge essere stato commesso: e mentre che quello beato spirito è nell'esercizio dell'uficio commesso, si chiama «angelo»; percioché «angelo» si dice da «*aggelos*» *graece*, che in latino viene a dire «messaggiere»; poi, fornita la commessione, non si chiama piú «angelo», ma reassume il suo nome principale, cioè «vertú», o «potestá», o «troni» o qual altro s'abbia.
>
> ("*He reached the*, locked, *gate and, with a wand*, which he carried in his right hand and by which are represented both the duty of the messenger and the authority of Him Who sent him. According to the theologians, God entrusts this duty to any of the celestial hierarchies, except for the Cherubim, about whom it is not written that they ever carried it out. While one of the blessed spirits is performing this duty, he is called an 'angel' because 'angelos' in Greek means 'messenger' in Italian. Once he has carried out his task, he is no longer called 'angel'; instead, he resumes his principal name, such as Virtue or Power or Throne or whatever else he may be").[293]

[293] Giovanni Boccaccio and Michael Papio, *Boccaccio's Expositions on Dante's Comedy*, (Toronto [Ont.]: University of Toronto Press, 2009): 412.

For Boccaccio, the role of an angel is temporary. Only the task of delivering a message marks out a figure as an angel, so once the herald fulfills its function, it reverts to an originary form or "whatever else he may be." Boccaccio suggests that the herald is a kind of a textual Swiss army knife whose identity is less important than its utility. It is striking that neither Boccaccio, nor contemporary scholars, are invested in uncovering or interrogating how and why the signifier transforms into the signified.

An argument related to the Christological allegory is that the figure is the embodiment of the Holy Spirit.[294] In this reading, the wind that accompanies the figure's descent is the force of the Holy Spirit entering Vergil and Dante. And while *La similitudine che egli appronta ha parecchi punti di riferimento classici* ("his appearance has a few classical points of reference"), ultimately the focus of the passage is on the interiority of the characters.[295] As we will see, the points are far from *parecchi,* and the Christological reading of the figure builds off the same reading as Boccaccio, it just narrows the scope of what the true identity of the allegorical figure's "principal name" is. This theory merely adds Christ to the list of possible names along with "Virtue or Power or Throne." Most contemporary interpretations of the messenger do not stray

[294] Natalino Sapegno illustrates how the messenger's control of the winds not only mirrors a psychological faculty in an allegorical reading, but it also embodies the force of the will of God: in quella potente personificazione dell'impeto del vento al v. 71, dove la rappresentazione d'una forza travolgente e invincibile si condensa in un dato psicologico e viene cosí a conferirle un'anima e una precisa volontà d'azione; con che l'attenzione del lettore è riportata dal paragone alla cosa paragonata, dal vento al messaggero in cui s'incarna il volere dell'Onnipotente ("in that powerful personification of the impact of the wind in v. 71, where the representation of an overwhelming and invincible force is condensed into a psychological fact and thus gives it a soul and a precise will to action; with which the reader's attention is brought back from the comparison to the thing being compared, from the wind to the messenger in whom the will of the Almighty is incarnated"), cited from the commentary to *Inferno*, IX.68 Natalino Sapegno, (The Dartmouth Dante Project, 1955-1957), as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project.

[295] Cited from the commentary to *Inferno*, IX.67-72 by Nicola Fosca, (The Dartmouth Dante Project, 2003-2015), as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project.

far from Boccaccio's 14th century exegesis, and to them, the messenger is nothing more than a physical manifestation of "His help" in these readings.

Mercury Theory and the Influence of the *Aeneid*

While scholars have looked at *Aeneid* 4's impact on the poem at large and considered intertextual resonances with Statius' Mercury from the *Thebaid*, no one has tied the two threads together or considered how incorporating Statius' source text, *Aeneid* 4, into the discussion informs the problem of the herald in Canto 9.[296] A familiar pattern emerges in the material that covers Mercury insofar as the herald is usually folded into typological or allegorical readings such as those mentioned above.[297] Even in Susanna Barsella's recent comparison of the figure to Mercury, she Christianizes the figure by arguing that Mercury here is an allegorical representation of "Angelic Intelligence."[298]

[296] Hollander refers to the identification of the figure as a debate between those who see an angel or those who see Statius' Mercury: "Over the centuries there has been a continuing argument between those who believe that the *messo* is Mercury and those who believe that he is an angel, and, in some cases, specifically Michael," cited from the commentary to *Inferno,* IX.85 by Robert Hollander, 2000-2007. For foundational work done on the subject of the figure's identity, see Silvio Pasquazi, "Messo celeste," *Enciclopedia dantesca*, no. 3 (Rome, 1971): 919-921, David Quint, "Epic Tradition and Inferno IX," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 93 (1975): 201–7, and Massimo Seriacopi, "Un riscontro testuale inedito per 'dal ciel messo' (*Inferno* IX 85)," (Publications of the Carla Rossi Academy Press, 1999). For a comprehensive study of the most recent debates on the subject, summary of the most recent debates, see Susanna Barsella, "The Heavenly Messenger (Inferno IX, 79-103)," in *In the Light of the Angels: Angelology and Cosmology in Dante's Divina Commedia / Susanna Barsella.* (Firenze: Olschki, 2010): 144-163.

[297] In a recent article by George Corbett on the importance of interventions by pagan figures throughout the *Commedia*, these classical figures are allegorical representations of human virtues. Corbett argues that using fallible pagan figures illustrates a universal struggle to understand God; humans are imperfect by nature, so Dante's contemporaries, like pagans, must make do with their own limitations. Nevertheless, the heavenly messenger is not counted among the pagan interventionists in Corbett's analysis; George Corbett, "Pagan Dawn of a Christian Vision," in *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy: Volume 1*, edited by George Corbett and Heather Webb, (Open Book Publishers, 2015): 12-24.

[298] Barsella 2010, 144-163.

It is my contention that this figure is not just similar to, but *similis* in the fashion of, the Mercurial figure of Aeneas' dream in *Aeneid* 4. Two primary questions about this passage inform my interpretation: what is a messenger from the sky and what is it about the figure that Dante knows so well that he recognizes it right away? Dante recognizes the figure because the messenger from the sky is the very same Mercurial figure from *Aeneid* 4, and not just an archetype for an intervening force, Christianizing or otherwise. As a consequence, it is not Reason or Christ, but Mercury who serves as the patron saint of the *Inferno*. The primary salvific figure who takes the reins of the *Inferno* is a pagan god.

Many of Dante's earliest commentators readily accepted the idea that the figure was Mercury, but that this Mercury was an angel, as Fosca makes clear in his compilation of interpretations about the episode.[299] It is also clear that all of these readings make allegorical claims about what Mercury would signify in a Christian context as if the pagan god of lies could function merely as a personification of eloquence or commerce exclusively, divorced from his other *timai*. At the very least, all of the premodern readings of the text reveal unresolved issues with the classical identification by identifying relevant passages from the *Thebaid* that may have been Dante's inspiration, but they do not interrogate how or why Mercury would show up at this crucial moment in the first place.

More contemporary philological studies of the Canti, from David Quint's article, "Epic Tradition and Inferno IX" from 1975 to Winthrop Wetherbee's book, *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets* from 2008, treat all classical allusions to Mercury as minor intertextual oddities. The focus of these studies is often to situate the herald into readings of Erichtho, the allegory of

[299] "La proposta d'identificazione alternativa più seguita, fin dal Trecento, è quella di Mercurio: particolarmente acconcia è la descrizione che si legge nella *Tebaide* (II.1-11) del dio che, con il caduceo in mano, risale dal mondo sotterraneo," cited from the commentary to *Inferno*, IX.76-81 by Nicola Fosca, (The Dartmouth Dante Project, 2003-2015), as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project.

the gorgons, and allusions to the *Thebaid*. Even Tristan Kay's sweeping investigation into Dante's use of *Aeneid* 4 throughout the *Commedia* only mentions Mercury twice, and just when summarizing key passages.[300] Quint's influential article, for example, argues that the intrusion of an episode from the *Thebaid* aligns Dante with Statius in light of Vergil's inability to enter Dis.[301] To Quint, Statius rejects the imperialist propaganda of Vergil's *Aeneid* and it is this rejection with which Dante now aligns himself after Canto 9. It is interesting that Quint makes this determination without considering how Mercury's trip to the underworld borrows from *Aeneid* 4 and without comparing the two models of intervention, especially given the fact that the circumstances surrounding the two Latin epics are markedly different.

Allusions to the *Thebaid* have obscured the Vergilian resonances of the episode, which are far more appropriate to the thematic and narrative tensions in Canto 8 and 9. In *Thebaid* 2, after Eteocles and Polynices agree to govern Thebes jointly, but in alternating shifts, acting king Eteocles receives a vision of his grandfather, Laius, in disguise. The ghost warns Eteocles that his brother means to take the throne for himself. It is Laius' ghost who incites the conflict between the Theban brothers that will lead to war, and it is Mercury who fetches Laius from the underworld and delivers him to Eteocles' sleeping chamber. There are undeniable and essential allusions in Canto 9 to Mercury's descent at the beginning of *Thebaid* 2 to fetch Laius' shade from the underworld. Both heralds descend to the underworld passing through thick and noxious fumes as they fly, both encounter or recall the taming of Cerberus, and both factor into narratives

[300] See Tristan Kay, "Dido, Aeneas, and the Evolution of Dante's Poetics," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society,* no. 129, (2011): 135–60.

[301] Quint 1975, 205.

about Eritcho, the Thessalian priestess.[302] However, key differences speak volumes and require further investigation.

It is impossible to read Statius without considering Vergil, just as it is impossible to isolate single textual antecedents for a poem as rich in allusion as Dante's *Inferno*. This Chapter will not consider and respond to every reference to the *Thebaid* in Canto 9. It is my intention to show that analyzes that do not consider the *Aeneid* alongside the *Thebaid* are missing an essential component to make sense of the intervention of the unnamed herald. The following table lays out some of the most pressing similarities and differences between all three epics:

Aeneid	*Thebaid*	*Inferno*
Facilitate movement	Incite violence	Facilitate movement
Opens the land	Avoids mortal world	Opens the land
Psychopomp role implied	Summon the dead	Banish the dead
Passes through clouds	Passes through clouds	Passes through clouds
Intervention serves larger goal	Unclear directive	Intervention serves larger goal
Mercury intervenes directly	Mercury does not speak	Mercury intervenes directly
Animal simile	No simile	Animal simile
virga	*virmen*	*verghetta*

The list above is not exhaustive, however, I will address these points in the following section.

omnia Mercurio similis

Of crucial importance to the identification of the herald in Canto 9 is the description of their descent and the use of a *virga* (wand) to open the locked gates of Dis (*In*.9.89). After the herald appears in the distance, Dante says,

> Come le rane innanzi a la nimica
> biscia per l'acqua si dileguan tutte,
> fin ch'a la terra ciascuna s'abbica,

[302] For the complete passage from Statius, see *Thebaid* 2.1-31.

vid' io più di mille anime distrutte
fuggir così dinanzi ad un ch'al passo
passava Stige con le piante asciutte.

Dal volto rimovea quell' aere grasso,
menando la sinistra innanzi spesso;
e sol di quell' angoscia parea lasso.

Ben m'accorsi ch'elli era da ciel messo,
e volsimi al maestro; e quei fé segno
ch'i' stessi queto ed inchinassi ad esso

Ahi quanto mi parea pien di disdegno!
Venne a la porta e con una verghetta
l'aperse, che non v'ebbe alcun ritegno

("As frogs confronted by their enemy,
the snake, will scatter underwater till
each hunches in a heap along the bottom,

so did the thousand ruined souls I saw
take flight before a figure crossing Styx
who walked as if on land and with dry soles.

He thrust away the thick air from his face,
waving his left hand frequently before him;
that seemed the only task that wearied him.

I knew well he was Heaven's messenger,
and I turned toward my master; and he made
a sign that I be still and bow before him.

How full of high disdain he seemed to me!
He came up to the gate, and with a wand,
he opened it, for there was no resistance" *In*.9.76-90).

A quick reread of this passage makes it clear that, compared to other angels in Dante's cosmology, this herald has some unusual features.[303] The emphasis on the figure's dry feet (*piante asciutte*) as it moves over the river Styx centers the figure's locomotion on its lower half

[303] For a thorough comparison of the various angels throughout the Divine Comedy, see Georgina Grace Moncrieff, "The Angels of Dante," *Life of the Spirit* 12, no. 135 (1957): 102–112.

and signals that the herald has no need of wings to fly. The emphasis on feet also signals a pun on the use of *passo* in that it connotes both "footstep" and "passage" here.[304] The reference to the herald's feet suggests that the passage in question is none other than Mercury's descent in *Aeneid* 4, when he ties his golden sandals to his *pedibus* (feet), a motif of the classical messenger that does not appear in the *Thebaid*. Most importantly, the herald opens the gates of Dis with a wand (*verghetta*), which mirrors the *virgam* (wand) of *Aeneid* 4 when Vergil describes Mercury's descent to the earth: *tum uirgam capit: hac animas ille euocat Orco / pallentis, alias sub Tartara tristia mittit* ("Then he took up his wand: he calls pale ghosts from Orcus with it, sending others down to grim Tartarus" *In*.9.4.242-243). The wand fulfills its epic function as the messenger directs the *mille anime,* souls of the dead, to flee before his coming. The word *verghetta* itself is as disruptive as the herald moving through hell with its dental double t sound appearing at the end of line 89 among a sea of phoneme and fricative line endings and masculine nouns. The intrusion of the classical object within a reference to the lacing of Mercury's sandals denies the reader the ability to identify the herald as a simple angel.

Nimble flight-capable feet and a magic wand should be enough to correctly identify the herald as the Mercury of the *Aeneid,* but there are other notable resonances between the figures that have gone unmarked in the critical record: both open up/make receptive physical spaces and neither disclose their identity.[305] As we can see in the following comparison to Mercury's descent in *Aeneid* 1, the herald opens the *terra* (land) itself, not just the gates of the city. The

[304] Franke 1994, 14.

[305] Jenny Strauss Clay, "Hide and Go Seek: Hermes in Homer," in John F. Miller, and Jenny Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury*, (Oxford University Press, 2019): pp. 68.

distinction is crucial, since the herald affirms that nothing or no one will further impede Dante's journey for its entire duration henceforth.[306]

1a.) Haec ait, et Maia genitum demittit ab alto, ut terrae, utque novae pateant Karthaginis arces hospitio Teucris, ne fati nescia Dido finibus arceret: ("Saying this, he sends Mercury, Maia's son, down from heaven, so that the country and strongholds of this new Carthage would open to the Trojans, as guests, and Dido, unaware of fate, would not keep them from her territory" *Aen.*1.297-300)	2a.) è gia di qua da lei discende l'erta, Passando per li cerchi sanza scorta, Tal che per lui ne fia la terra aperta ("and now, already well within that gate, across the circles-and alone-descends the one who will unlock this realm for us" *In.*8.128-130)

Appropriately, this description matches Mercury's first descent to Earth in *Aeneid* 1 in which Vergil writes, *Haec ait, et Maia genitum demittit ab alto, / ut terrae, utque novae pateant Karthaginis arces* ("Saying this, he sends Mercury, Maia's son, down from heaven, so that the country and strongholds of this new Carthage would open [to the Trojans]" *Aen.*1.297-298). In both works the imagery is that of "opening" in the physical and metaphorical senses in order to protect the respective protagonists from harm in a hostile environment. The work of both heralds is fundamentally to act upon the space surrounding the beneficiaries of their intervention and not on the bodies of the epic protagonists.

While the messenger makes no clear attempt at deception with its speech, it nevertheless obscures its identity by embodying the ambiguity of the classical herald. Vergil foresees the coming of the herald and Dante recognizes him, but neither gives the herald a name. Appropriately, the herald neither acknowledges their presence nor names himself *e non fé motto a noi* ("and he did not speak to us" *In.*9.101). All parties made witnesses to his descent know him

[306] Perché recalcitrate a quella voglia / a cui non puote il fin mai esser mozzo? ("Why are you so reluctant to endure that Will whose aim can never be cut short?" *In.*94-95).

completely (*ben*) and immediately. The process by which this happens is not unlike that which authorizes Aeneas' vision of the figure *omnia Mercurio similis* ("similar to Mercury in every way" *Aen*.4.558). Just as Aeneas recognizes Mercury instantaneously in his dream, despite the text's refusal to acknowledge the veracity of his presence, so too the herald both is and is not legible as the classical allusions that mark his arrival go unacknowledged. As we will learn in *Paradiso* 4, Mercury, whatever the typological, mythological, or allegorical valence of that name, belongs in heaven; he should not be here.

The efficacy of the herald in Canto 9 relies upon both the *verghetta* and his command of language to accomplish his task, uniting thought and deed. Just as Hermes reasoned with Calypso in *Odyssey* 5, the messenger here engages the heroes' obstacle in dialogue. However, unlike the Homeric Hermes, the messenger does not negotiate. There is no alternative that is not first filtered through and approved by the Mercurial figure. Response to the herald's demand is neither invited nor permitted. The arrogant demons that refuse to admit Vergil and Dante keep to the walls built up around them, just as Aeneas is building up (*extruis*) the walls of Carthage when Mercury accosts him in *Aeneid* 4. And just as in Mercury's intervention in *Aeneid* 4, rhetorical questions empower the messenger to motivate characters obstructing the flow of the diegesis from behind their walls.[307] The herald asks:

[307] Mercury asks Aeneas,

> nate dea, potes hoc sub casu ducere somnos,
> nec quae te circum stent deinde pericula cernis,
> demens, nec Zephyros audis spirare secundos?
> illa dolos dirumque nefas in pectore versat
> certa mori, variosque irarum concitat aestus.
> non fugis hinc praeceps, dum praecipitare potestas?
>
> ("Son of the Goddess, can you consider sleep in this disaster, can't you see the danger of it that surrounds you, madman or hear the favourable west winds blowing? Determined to die, she

O cacciati del ciel, gente dispetta»,
cominciò elli in su l'orribil soglia,
«ond' esta oltracotanza in voi s'alletta?

Perché recalcitrate a quella voglia
a cui non puote il fin mai esser mozzo,
e che più volte v'ha cresciuta doglia?

Che giova ne le fata dar di cozzo?
Cerbero vostro, se ben vi ricorda,
ne porta ancor pelato il mento e 'l gozzo»

("'O you cast out of Heaven, hated crowd,'
were his first words upon that horrid threshold,
'why do you harbor this presumptuousness?

Why are you so reluctant to endure
that Will whose aim can never be cut short,
and which so often added to your hurts?

What good is it to thrust against the fates?
Your Cerberus, if you remember well,
for that, had both his throat and chin stripped clean'" *In*.9.91-99).

The herald speaks almost exclusively in rhetorical questions save for a single indirect threat of violence at the end of his speech. What is clear is that alternative courses of action only exist in the hypothetical space of the herald's rhetorical questions. As a consequence, to whom (*a cui*) the *voglia* (will) belongs above is demonstrably not God, as the capitalization of "Will" in the translation suggests, but Mercury. It is the Mercurial ambiguity that authorizes Dante's journey into hell as the herald does not enact a single directive and leaves the purpose of his intervention implicit. The god of borders addresses those who serve at a *soglia* (threshold), and they have no choice but to acquiesce to an outcome that the herald selects from multiple potential eventualities.

broods on mortal deceit and sin, and is tossed about on anger's volatile flood. Won't you flee from here, in haste, while you can hasten?" *Aen*.4.560-565).

The herald's rhetorical questions are construed as *parole sante* ("holy words") and they parallel Dante's observation that Vergil has expressed a *parola tronca* ("broken phrase/word") to simultaneously evoke the death of Priam and to signal that multiple verbal strategies are at play in Canto 8 and 9. When Vergil is distraught at the impedance to their journey in *Canto* 8, Dante suggests that his guide's words fail to match his intent: *perch' io traeva la parola tronca / forse a peggior sentenzia che non tenne* ("because I drew out from his broken phrase / a meaning worse—perhaps—than he'd intended" *In*.9.15). In this moment, Dante the pilgrim offers up a rare moment of textual criticism and close-reads Vergil's words.[308] However, I do not take the messenger's *parole sante* to be a corrective gesture in response to a failing on Vergil's part. In fact, the herald's words allow Vergil and Dante more control over the direction of their journey. Dante remarks, *e noi movemmo i piedi inver' la terra, / sicuri appresso le parole sante* ("and we moved forward, on into the city, / in safety, having heard his holy words" 9.103-105). These lines remind us that the herald does not address the pilgrims, as his purpose was to open the land itself. As a consequence, it is now possible for the pilgrims to navigate *inver'* (opposite or in opposition to) the *terra* with their own *piedi*, just as the herald navigated above the river Styx with his own feet.

The evocation of Priam with the word *tronca* and the transformation of a singular *parola* into many words in the passage above suggest that alternative outcomes are possible through the herald's intervention. *Tronca* is a relatively rare word in the *Commedia*, and it only appears in the text of the *Inferno*.[309] At this critical juncture, the word *tronca* evokes Priam death in *Aeneid* 2 who *iacet ingens litore truncus, / avulsumque umeris caput et sine nomine corpus* ("A once

[308] Cited from the commentary to *Inferno*, IX.10-15 by Robert Hollander, 2000-2007

[309] The adjective tronco or the verb troncare appear 13 times throughout the *Inferno* at *In*.7.114; *In*.13.28, 33, 55, 91, 109; *In*.18.18; *In*.20.51; *In*.28.65, 121, 141; *In*.30.51.

mighty body lies on the shore, the head / shorn from its shoulders, a corpse without a name" *Aen*.2.557-558). The association suggests that governmental or martial authorities do not, on their own, represent successful models of intervention. Despite Hermes' guidance in *Iliad* 24, Priam is ultimately severed from his reasoning faculties (*caput*), his identity (*corpus*), and his power of language (*nomine*) in *Aeneid* 2. In other words, the implication of using a beheaded word is that reliance on a single phrase or outcome will not prove productive or authoritative in Hell. The Mercurial figure presents an alternative model by transforming the singular *tronca parola* into the plural *sante parole*. The transformation through multiplication shows that there is no single string of correct or appropriate phrases to inoculate the travelers from harm. This is a fundamental feature of the Mercurial figure's ability to select from multiple hypothetical outcomes, as represented by the rhetorical questions above. The plurality of holy words mirrors the multiplicity/possibility of the epic story's trajectory, and it is for precisely this reason that Vergil and Dante are able to navigate over the *terra* freely after the herald's intervention without the need for further celestial impositions.

Both Aeneid 4 and Inferno 9 conceptualize the intervention through similes about animals and compare the force of their intervention to the violence of a predator stalking prey as they transform the physical world around the person or persons who are stuck in stasis. The use of predatory animal similes in *Aeneid* 4 and *Inferno* 9 illustrates how the work of both heralds transforms the physical world around the person or persons being detained. When the herald arrives in Canto 9, the text states that the souls of the dead fled underwater as if they were frogs fleeing a snake (2b.). The potentially problematic comparison of the divine herald to a snake makes sense in the context of a similar comparison present in Mercury's descent in *Aeneid* 4, wherein Mercury is a bird circling the ocean brimming with fish (1b.):

1b..) hic primum paribus nitens Cyllenius alis constitit; hinc toto praeceps se corpore ad undas misit avi similis, quae circum litora, circum piscosos scopulos humilis volat aequora iuxta. haud aliter terras inter caelumque volabat ("There Cyllenian Mercury first halted, balanced on level wings: from there, he threw his whole body headlong towards the waves, like a bird that flies low close to the sea, round the coasts and the rocks rich in fish" *Aen*.4.252-256)	2b..) Come le rane innanzi a la nimica biscia per l'acqua si dileguan tutte, fin ch'a la terra ciascuna s'abbica ("As frogs confronted by their enemy, the snake, will scatter underwater till each hunches in a heap along the bottom" *In*.9.76-78)

In both similes, we see how masses of prey animals, *rane* ("frogs") and *picosos scopulos* ("fish"), survive at the mercy of predatory creatures who impose themselves upon their environments. The disruptions of the predators on the landscape are so severe that the frogs cling to the facsimile of land (*terra*) underwater, unable to escape their swampy prison and having confused wet for dry. Similarly, in the *Aeneid* passage, the transferred epithet of *picosos* (fishy/full of fish) applied to the rocks demonstrates that the swooping bird's presence blurs the division between living/dead and dry/wet. Just as these predatory animals operate as the mediating force that determines the state and outcome of their prey, so too does the herald define the bounds of the *terra* for the pilgrims in that the messenger determines the rules that govern the landscape around the protagonists. It is the invasive herald who defines the bounds of what is and is not possible just as the predators reshape the environment in these similes.

As we have seen, it is impossible to disentangle the complex chain of reception that makes Canto 9 legible, however, it is also clear that too many interpretations of the Canto elide the inheritance of Mercury from the *Aeneid* in service of their allegorical preferences. The messenger from the sky diverges too much from other intermediaries in the *Inferno* who are themselves damned or, at the least, not granted access to heaven. If the figure were an angel, its

presence would be an exemption to the pattern of godly figures using damned intermediaries in Hell. Vergil himself points out how rare the occurrence is as the messenger joins some rarified company including Christ, Hercules, Aeneas, Odysseus, and Vergil.

2.) Competing Models of Intervention: Mercurial Hero(es)

Any comparison between the messenger of the *Aeneid* and the *Inferno* must deal with the disparity in the number of their appearances in both texts. As we know, Mercury famously appears three times in Vergil's epic, whereas the messenger from heaven only ever intervenes once. While I argue in Chapter 2 that Mercury's three appearances explore the tension between the oscillations of Hermes' Apolline and Dionysiac *timai*, the *Inferno*'s reception of the *Aeneid* considers to whom the Mercurial model of intervention belongs. In *Inferno* 8 and 9, the problem is not that multiple interventions interrupt the flow of the narrative, but that we have 3 characters who are themselves intruders. In other words, rather than intervene three times, as he does in the *Aeneid*, the Mercurial messenger's single intervention is split bodily at this juncture into three characters: the messenger from heaven, Dante the pilgrim, and Vergil the guide. Each of the three characters exhibits a fittedness to Mercurial speech because each is a trespasser: Dante is not dead, Vergil is not damned, and Mercury belongs in heaven (or to the imagination). The three mercurial outcomes authorize three different strains of authorial power simultaneously and demonstrate that there is no single fixed outcome or corrective logic/hierarchizing of the relationship between Dante/Vergil or pagan/Christian literary traditions. Each figure in Canto 9 adheres to these characteristics of the Mercurial figure from the Aeneid in that they are interlocutors who demonstrate some authorial control over the landscape of Hell.

The Mercurial Dante

Dante's designation as an author in his own right relies upon two essential aspects of the Mercurial figure in that he operates as a liminal figure and intermediary. Dante as poet and pilgrim embodies the oscillation between the bodily experience of Hell as a landscape (Dionysiac) and the impulse to describe the experience through language (Apolline). Consider the first invocation to the Muse in Canto 2 that crystalizes the conflict:

> O muse, o alto ingegno, or m'aiutate;
> o mente che scrivesti ciò ch'io vidi,
> qui si parrà la tua nobilitate
>
> (O Muses, o high genius, help me now;
> o memory that set down what I saw,
> here shall your excellence reveal itself *In*.2.7-9).

Dante is a translator in multiple senses, whose task is to record/write that which he sees or experiences. The incorporation of Dante's own *mente* into the list of epithets for the Muse renders his subjective experience an essential mediating component of Mary's plan. The bifurcation of his mind from his work and experience also reminds the reader that he is an arbiter of space who limits what can and cannot be expressed through language. Dante defines the borders of Hell and is one of the few historical/mythological figures who can bridge the gap between worlds.[310]

[310] Simone Marchesi's survey of work on authorship in the *Inferno* reveals that Dante makes three claims at authority, all of which are rooted to fictions: "Three essential elements have been isolated in Dante's reading pact with his audience, all of them difficult clauses. The first element is the authorial autoptic claim underlying the narrative ("I swear I have witnessed all that is recounted here"); the second, the unwavering biographical coherence projected on the poem's character as poet ("I am and have always been the poet of Love, and love for Beatrice"); and third, the insinuated appeal to divine aspiration ("The source of my poetry is the same as that of the biblical authors, i.e., it is divine"). One can look at these three mechanisms for the Comedy's self-validation as Dante's three fictions of authority," Simone Marchesi, "Epic Ironies: Poetics, Metapoetics, Self-Translation ('Inferno' 18.1, 'Purgatorio' 24.52, 'Paradiso' 1.13)," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 131 (2013): 99. For a detailed account of each of these claims, see endnote 2 in Marchesi's article.

Dante, as the final intermediary in the chain of intermediaries employed by the Virgin Mary, needs to traverse multiple boundaries until fulfilling a great task/mission/purpose.[311] However, all of Dante's authority to make these distinctions or to translate the environment derives from his liminal status. The crime for which the demons bar the gates to him is the source of his entire power to translate.[312] Nonetheless, Dante's liminality is the basis for much of the conflict in the first half of the *Inferno* (Charon, etc.).[313] Canto 8 represents the first instance where Dante's intrusion prevents him from continuing his journey. The intervention of the Mercurial messenger at this moment reaffirms Dante the pilgrim's protected status by authorizing his liminality when doubt is raised as to his fittedness to traverse both the worlds of the dead and the living. On *l'orribil soglia* ("horrible threshold"), the herald asks of the obstructive demons, *Perché recalcitrate a quella voglia / a cui non puote il fin mai esser mozzo?* ("Why are you so reluctant to endure that Will whose aim can never be cut short?" *In*.9.92-95). In this way, the messenger confirms that nothing can sever (*mozzo*) Dante's movements or his need to transcribe his experiences from a higher authority (*voglia*). In other words, Dante the pilgrim enjoys a kind of equal status to that of the messenger and traverses the landscape of Hell in much the same manner.

The Mercurial Vergil

[311] Vergil explains that the Virgin Mary dispatched Saint Lucia to speak to Beatrice in heaven to intervene on Dante's behalf. It is Beatrice who then sends Vergil out of Limbo to guide Dante through Hell: *In*.2.49-118.

[312] The demons at the gates of Dis demand to know, Chi è costui che sanza morte / va per lo regno de la morta gente? ("Who is this who, without death, can journey through the kingdom of the dead?" *In*.8.84-85).

[313] Hollander notes that, "Charon's insistence on Dante's difference – he is alive, the others dead – will find frequent repetition as the protagonist's extraordinary presence in hell is noted by various guardians and damned souls," cited from the commentary to *Inferno,* III.88 by Robert Hollander, 2000-2007.

Countless studies have been done to link Dante to Aeneas, but if we are to explore the parallels between the *Aeneid* 4 and the *Inferno* 9, what do we make of Vergil? Although compelling work has been done on Vergil and gender in the *Commedia*, the context makes it clear that he is no Dido figure attempting to restrain Dante from completing his journey.[314] In fact, a closer look at Vergil's description of Erichtho's nekyia and the allegory of the gorgons in Canto 9 reveals that Vergil is himself another kind of Mercurial hero, just like Aeneas and Dante.

Vergil, like Dante, is a cipher who translates space through language. Though he is situated in space through a different temporal orientation in that he has, by his own admission, taken this journey before.[315] Vergil operates from a position of experience, whose knowledge is primarily informed by the past. Of course, Vergil authored the source text that makes Hell legible to Dante in the first place.[316] If Dante is a translator for the reader, Vergil is Dante's translator or filter, and in some cases, Vergil acts as an actual interpreter when there is a language barrier between a denizen of hell and Dante the pilgrim.[317] This dynamic between Dante and Vergil is well documented, so I will not belabor the point. However, in asserting his

[314] For example, scholars have explored Vergil's gender performance in light of the simile that describes the moment in *Purgatorio* 30 when Beatrice supplants Vergil as his guide and construes Dante as a child to Vergil's "*mamma*." Hollander considers how Virgil is both mother and father to Dante's poem: "It is dangerous to schematize, but it is possible to think that Dante thought of Virgil as father in his role as Dante's *magister*, as *mamma* in his role as giver of linguistic nutriment," Robert Hollander, "Babytalk in Dante's Commedia," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 8, no. 4 (1975): 80. For more information about the motif of motherhood and its importance throughout the *Commedia*, see Gary Cestaro, "'...Quanquam Sarnum Biberimus Ante Dentes...': The Primal Scene of Suckling in Dante's De Vulgari Eloquentia," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 109 (1991): 119–47.

[315] For Vergil's account of his previous trip, see *In*.9.19-63.

[316] As Virgil is Dante's *exemplum*: Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore ("You are my master and my author" *In*.1.85).

[317] For example, Vergil translates Dante's questions to Odysseus in Canto 26.

authority as an intermediary in Canto 9, Vergil also demonstrates that he has more in common with Mercury.

Not only is Vergil a messenger, translator, and intermediary, but he is also a seasoned traveler and psychopomp ("escorter of souls"), just like Mercury. When asked if anyone has made the journey from Limbo into the city of Dis in the past while waiting for the arrival of the messenger in Canto 9, Vergil responds *de rado* ("rarely" *In*.9.19). But he does admit to having taken this journey once before, when he was summoned by Erichtho at some unknown point in the past:

> «In questo fondo de la trista conca
> discende mai alcun del primo grado,
> che sol per pena ha la speranza cionca?».
>
> Questa question fec' io; e quei «Di rado
> incontra», mi rispuose, «che di noi
> faccia il cammino alcun per qual io vado.
>
> Ver è ch'altra fiata qua giù fui,
> congiurato da quella Eritón cruda
> che richiamava l'ombre a' corpi sui.
>
> Di poco era di me la carne nuda,
> ch'ella mi fece intrar dentr' a quel muro,
> per trarne un spirto del cerchio di Giuda.
>
> Quell' è 'l più basso loco e 'l più oscuro,
> e 'l più lontan dal ciel che tutto gira:
> ben so 'l cammin; però ti fa sicuro.
>
> ("'Does anyone from the first circle, one
> whose only punishment is crippled hope,
> ever descend so deep in this sad hollow?"
>
> That was my question. And he answered so:
> "It is quite rare for one of us to go
> along the way that I have taken now.

> But I, in truth, have been here once before:
> that savage witch Erichtho, she who called
> the shades back to their bodies, summoned me.
>
> My flesh had not been long stripped off when she
> had me descend through all the rings of Hell,
> to draw a spirit back from Judas' circle.
>
> That is the deepest and the darkest place,
> the farthest from the heaven that girds all:
> so rest assured, I know the pathway well" *In*.9.16-30).

Vergil highjacks the Canto at a critical juncture to relate a different, but nevertheless related story of his own nekyia in which he drags (*trarne*) a soul from Hell. Interestingly, the witch Erichtho forced Vergil to enter Hell, but was unable to pull the unnamed soul away from the circle of Judas on her own. Yet it is Vergil, freshly deceased and having never made the journey through Hell previously, who is able to accomplish this miraculous feat of guiding another soul through the underworld. The emphasis of flesh throughout the vignette with the *cruda* sorcerer, the cadaver's *carne nuda*, and unnamed *corpa*, suggests that what underpins Vergil's authority in Canto 8 is his ecstatic and bodily experience of the terrors of hell in service of a task that is characteristic of the ultimate navigator of space, Mercury.

Vergil's authority in Canto 8 not only relies upon his prior experiences as an otherworldly guide, but also his ability to compose and draft verses about that experience. Even during the interruption of the pilgrims' journey at the end of Canto 8, when the larger diegesis is in danger of collapsing, Vergil remains an active storyteller and allegorist in his recounting of his previous journey to Hell. Dante misconstrues Vergil's powers of invention when he suggests that his guide suffers from a lack of imagination. When Dante sees that Vergil has been rebuffed at the gates (*tornare in volta In*.9.2), he describes his guide as a man listening when his eyes fail to work:

> Attento si fermò com' uom ch'ascolta;

ché l'occhio nol potea menare a lunga
per l'aere nero e per la nebbia folta.

("He stood alert, like an attentive listener,
because his eye could hardly journey far
across the black air and the heavy fog" *In*.9.4-6).

However, this analogy fails to acknowledge how Vergil in Canto 8 and 9 conjoins the power of his perception with the ability to articulate that which he sees or has seen. Not only can Vergil see the coming of the Mercurial messenger through the *nebbia*, as we learn in the last lines of Canto 8 when he identifies the messenger, Vergil's eye (*occhio*) and body have traversed the darkest corners of hell (*'l più oscuro*) already.[318] To reveal his credentials to Dante, Vergil narrates his experience with the gorgon sisters when he was summoned by Erichtho as a psychopomp. The allegory of the three sisters imposes two different delays on the narrative: it threatens to end Dante's journey, but it also delays the reading of the Canto in real time. Readers of the poem experience the same tension as Dante the pilgrim while sharing his anxiety on the threshold of Dis. Mercury cannot arrive, nor can the narrative commence, until Vergil authors his own nekyia and certifies his credentials as a psychopompos. By putting the verses of the allegory in the mouth of Vergil, the text demands that any meaning mined from the story must be filtered through the cipher of the classical poet. Despite his death and liminal status in Limbo, Vergil remains a capable author.

[318] Vergil sees the messenger coming:

e già di qua da lei discende l'erta,
passando per li cerchi sanza scorta,
tal che per lui ne fia la terra aperta

("and now, already well within that gate,
across the circles—and alone—descends
the one who will unlock this realm for us" *In*.8.128-130).

In fact, Vergil exhibits a great deal of control over the narrative and the environment as he reminds Dante that they are both treading in territory that the classical poet sketched out in the *Aeneid*. Dante's Hell is, after all, an intertextual world of Vergil's own creation, as his identification of the Furies makes clear; when confronted by the threats of the Furies, the text reads that Vergil *ben conobbe le meschine* ("knew these handmaids well" *In*.9.43). This is no surprise given that two of the three Furies feature prominently in the *Aeneid*.[319] Not only does Vergil name them, but he also organizes them as well:

> «Guarda», mi disse, «le feroci Erine.
>
> Quest' è Megera dal sinistro canto;
> quella che piange dal destro è Aletto;
> Tesifón è nel mezzo»; e tacque a tanto.
>
> ("said: "Look at the ferocious Erinyes!
>
> That is Megaera on the left, and she
> who weeps upon the right, that is Alecto;
> Tisiphone's between them." He was done" *In*.9.45-48).

Here, Vergil first defines the periphery of the three Furies before filling in the middle position at the end of the tercet. The force of this outside/in framing suggests that Tisiphone is the glue that binds the three sisters together into a single unit. By making Tisiphone the keystone in the formation of the Furies, Vergil reminds Dante that she is the same Fury who guards the gates of Tartarus in *Aeneid* 6. Vergil falls silent (*tacque*) immediately, as if to provide the last word on each Fury after having invoked the same landscape from his own epic poem. No commentary or emendations to the story are necessary now that Vergil has framed the episode through his own

[319] Nell'*Eneide* si legge appunto di Megera (XII.846ss.), etimologicamente 'la nemica', di Aletto (VII.324ss.), 'l'inquieta', e di Tesifone (VI.555ss., 571; X.761), 'la punitrice degli omicidi,' ("In the *Aeneid* one reads appropriately of Megara (XII.846ss.), etymologically 'the enemy,' of Alecto (VII.324ss.), 'restlessness,' and of Tisiphone (VI.555ss., 571; X.761), 'the avenger of homicide'), cited from the commentary to *Inferno*, IX.43-48 by Nicola Fosca, 2003-20015.

depiction of Hell. The most pressing information about them is their relative positions since their power over the gate is negligible in the face of Vergil's knowledge. Tisiphone is merely an intertextual hinge upon which both the *Inferno*'s and the *Aeneid*'s gates turn.

A reevaluation of the messenger in *Inferno* 8-9 also forces us to reconsider Vergil's shortcomings as a guide for the post-classical imagination of the underworld. Teodolinda Barolini, among many others, argues that *Inferno* 7-9 constitutes a distinct episode wherein Vergil fails Dante for the first time.[320] A common observation about Vergil in these arguments is that he cannot make meaningful progress or move into the future because there is a missing element that renders previous experience and authorship ineffectual. The solution, in these readings, is the arrival of the salvific angel who opens the gates of Dis when Vergil cannot. However, we must be skeptical of Vergil's claims of helplessness, especially in light of the fact that the travelers' savior is his own epic herald, as we have seen. In fact, Vergil's powers of authorship are central to the success of Dante's entry into Dis. Whatever peril they currently face at the gates, Vergil reassures Dante: *ben so 'l cammin; però ti fa sicuro* ("so rest assured, I know the pathway well" *In*.9.30). Vergil has not only seen the *'l più basso loco e 'l più oscuro / e 'l più lontan dal ciel che tutto gira* ("the deepest and the darkest place, /the farthest from the heaven that girds all"), he has written the book on hell and continues to write it in real time alongside Dante. Given the various similarities between this episode and *Aeneid* 4, as I outlined above, it is

[320] Barolini notes that, "*Inferno* 8 constitutes the first moment in a complex narrative arc. *Inferno* 8 is part of an extended storyline that begins with the watchtower in the last verse of *Inferno* 7 and that is not completed until the arrival of the heavenly intercessor toward the end of *Inferno* 9," Teodolinda Barolini, "*Inferno* 8: In Medias Res . . . at the "Secret" Gate of Dis," *Commento Baroliniano,* Digital Dante, (New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018): 4.

clear that Vergil is not helpless, nor out of his depth.[321] When the demons at the gates of Dis rebuff Vergil, the poet tells Dante:

> E a me disse: «Tu, perch' io m'adiri,
> non sbigottir, ch'io vincerò la prova,
> qual ch'a la difension dentro s'aggiri.
>
> Questa lor tracotanza non è nova;
> ché già l'usaro a men segreta porta,
> la qual sanza serrame ancor si trova.
>
> Sovr' essa vedestù la scritta morta:
> e già di qua da lei discende l'erta,
> passando per li cerchi sanza scorta,
>
> tal che per lui ne fia la terra aperta».
>
> ("To me he added: "You—though I am vexed—
> must not be daunted; I shall win this contest,
> whoever tries—within—to block our way.
>
> This insolence of theirs is nothing new;
> they used it once before and at a gate
> less secret—it is still without its bolts—
>
> the place where you made out the fatal text;
> and now, already well within that gate,
> across the circles—and alone—descends
>
> the one who will unlock this realm for us" *In*.8.121-130).

Here, Vergil prophesies how he in the first person, not another, will *vincerò la prova* (overcome the obstacle). The force of this ordering is significant because it reveals that Vergil is not prophesying the coming of the Mercurial figure, he is summoning the herald himself, just as he had in the past because their predicament is nothing new: *lor tracotanza non è nova* ("Their arrogance is nothing new" *In*.8.124). This fact explains how it is that he knows that Mercury *già di qua da lei discende l'erta* ("already descends from that slope"). Vergil himself, at a similar

[321] See *In*.9.28-29.

crossroads, deployed the mercurial messenger in his own poem to alleviate the same threat of narrative stagnation in *Aeneid* 4: Mercury originates from Vergil's poem. What is on display here is not failure but another Mercurial intervention. The oscillations between the corporeal navigation of dead bodies and the ability to author new stories at the same time reflect the Mercurial figure's command of both Dionysiac and Apolline *timai*.

Deception

A crucial component of the Mercurial figure is its relationship to the lie, but deception for the three intermediaries in Canto 8 and 9 is subtle and largely embodied in the characters' actions as opposed to their speech acts: Mercury does not reveal his identity, Dante claims to be no Aeneas, and Vergil feigns powerlessness in his own narrative.

Despite the fact that Mercury carries the symbol of his office (the *virga*), flies between realms, and delivers a divine mandate, he does not speak to Dante or Vergil directly and, as a consequence, actively suppresses his identity. All experience of Mercury is indirect or at a glance, which is ironic given the insistence of Dante in Canto 9 that he knows him so well.[322] Though we should not be surprised by Mercury's behavior, given Hermes/Mercury's habit of bypassing the epiphanic moment in the classical record.[323] The success of Mercury's deception is evident in the critical record that refuses to consider that he is anything but an angel.

[322] Ben m'accorsi ch'elli era da ciel messo ("I knew well he was Heaven's messenger," *In*.9.85).

[323] "The lack of any striking epiphanic revelation may have something to do with the fact that this god is especially philanthropic and close to human beings," Jenny Strauss Clay, "Hide and Go Seek: Hermes in Homer," in John F. Miller, and Jenny Strauss Clay (eds), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury*, (Oxford University Press, 2019): 68.

Dante the pilgrim's false modesty is infamous and speaks to the larger artifice of the poem to ground his authority in a series of fictions.[324] When faced with the prospect of a journey into hell in Canto 2, Dante the pilgrims states,

> Ma io, perché venirvi? o chi 'l concede?
> Io non Enëa, io non Paulo sono;
> me degno a ciò né io né altri 'l crede.
>
> ("But why should I go there? Who sanctions it?
> For I am not Aeneas, am not Paul;
> nor I nor others think myself so worthy" *In*.2.31-33).

As the numerous parallels between the *Inferno* and the *Aeneid* attest, Dante is absolutely filling the same epic shoes as Aeneas. However, in Canto 9 a convergence of Dante the pilgrim and poet temporarily surfaces that centers a model of reading rooted in deception:

> O voi ch'avete li 'ntelletti sani,
> mirate la dottrina che s'asconde
> sotto 'l velame de li versi strani.
>
> ("O you possessed of sturdy intellects,
> observe the teaching that is hidden here
> beneath the veil of verses so obscure" *In*.9.61-63).

For a moment here, it is impossible to disentangle Dante the pilgrim's reaction to and experience of the gorgon allegory from the poet's direct address to the reader to read between the lines. The effect of the blurring of the different manifestations of Dante imbues the allegory itself with tension, heightening the secret meaning of the story by introducing another level to the mystery. Dante's playful unwillingness to lift the *velamen* from the hidden meaning represents a moment when the desire to allegorize collides with the mechanism that makes allegory possible to break the reader's immersion. It is a jarring metatextual interruption based on figurative language and the deceptive blurring of the poet's subjectivity. I will return to the question of deception and lies

[324] Marchesi 2013, 99.

to consider Dante the poet's novel additions and the liberties that he takes with historical information in a future section of the Chapter.

As we have just seen, Vergil feigns powerlessness in his own narrative about Erichtho and the Furies. On top of this, the features of the narrative borrowed from Vergil's epic make for a doubling of *Aeneid* 4, which centers Vergil as both subject expert and partial composer of the episode. Not only does Vergil instigate the intervention of Mercury in Canto 8, he directs both Dante the pilgrim and the reader to fix their gaze towards the unseen herald: *Li occhi mi sciolse e disse: Or drizza il nerbo / del viso su per quella schiuma antica* ("He freed my eyes and said: "Now let your optic nerve turn directly toward that ancient foam" *In*.9.73-74). Vergil conducts the scene as if he were a stage manager, whose familiarity with the drama comes from the *antica* set dressings. The force of the third person singular imperative, *drizza*, makes the reader an accomplice to Vergil's direction and forces the reader to consider not just the emergence of the herald, but its ancient lineage as well as Vergil's relationship to that lineage.

Allegory of the Gorgon

The allegory of the gorgon in Canto 9 reveals that the relationship between the three Mercurial figures is complementary and not competitive in nature. Though this may seem surprising given that the competition between multiple intermediaries, such as Cupid and Fama, in the *Aeneid* threatens to overwhelm the narrative with stasis as they jostle for power in Books 1-4, the allegory of the gorgon stages the means by which the Mercurial figures defy a central organizing principle to the storytelling within Hell. The arrival of the messenger is less corrective than it is supportive in that it allows Dante and Vergil, authors in their own right, to tell their stories in whatever manner they see fit. The allegory is one of the most studied features

of *Inferno* 9, due in part to Dante's invitation to the reader to interpret the meaning behind it.[325] However much ink has been spilled to identify a key to the allegory, its proximity to Dante's exhortation to the reader and to Mercury's arrival often goes unnoticed. Rather than treat them as two distinct and disconnected episodes, the allegory and the intervention should be read in concert. In this reading, deception for the Mercurial figures, just like the lie in the *nusquam* of the *Aeneid*, is productive insofar as it operates as an invitation to engage with the poem on an exegetic level. Dante's exhortation to the reader in Canto 8 to look beneath the veil of the allegory construes the Mercurial deception as a kind of mystery or puzzle that requires unraveling through the constellation of intertextuality that the allegory activates.

The relationship between sight and spatial orientation in the allegory of the gorgon restages the larger problem of delay and agency at the gates of Dis in Canto 9. After ordering the Furies about the gates of Dis, the Furies threaten that the arrival of Medusa is imminent:

> Con l'unghie si fendea ciascuna il petto;
> battiensi a palme e gridavan sì alto,
> ch'i' mi strinsi al poeta per sospetto.
>
> «Vegna Medusa: sì 'l farem di smalto»,
> dicevan tutte riguardando in giuso;
> «mal non vengiammo in Tesëo l'assalto».
>
> «Volgiti 'n dietro e tien lo viso chiuso;
> ché se 'l Gorgón si mostra e tu 'l vedessi,
> nulla sarebbe di tornar mai suso».

[325] There is no consensus on the key to the gorgon allegory. For an overview of 20th century scholarship on the issue, see Nicola Fosca's commentary for *In*.9.61. In her recent work, Florence Russo makes the case that Medusa represents the "seductive power of earthly concerns," however, Russo relies on the interpretation that Vergil fails to protect Dante from Medusa's temptation and requires the intervention of the divine messenger: divine grace is needed to overcome such obstacles. They constitute forms of entrapment that point out the weakness of the pilgrim's power of reason. That is why Virgil, who represents reason, fails to overcome the threat and must await the arrival of a higher power to dispose of the impediments," Florence Russo, "'Cupiditas', the Medusean Heresy of Farinata," *Italica* 89, no. 4 (2012): 450-451.

Così disse 'l maestro; ed elli stessi
mi volse, e non si tenne a le mie mani,
che con le sue ancor non mi chiudessi.

Each Fury tore her breast with taloned nails;
each, with her palms, beat on herself and wailed
so loud that I, in fear, drew near the poet.

"Just let Medusa come; then we shall turn
him into stone," they all cried, looking down;
"we should have punished Theseus' assault."

"Turn round and keep your eyes shut fast, for should
the Gorgon show herself and you behold her,
never again would you return above,"

my master said; and he himself turned me
around and, not content with just my hands,
used his as well to cover up my eyes" *In*.9.49-60).

Unsurprisingly, the focus of an allegory about Medusa is sight. *Lo viso* is what bridges the physical body of Dante to Medusa's deadly power, so in order to protect himself, Dante must close off (*chiuso*) or interrupt the visual link to Medusa. However, the regulation of sight here is contentious. Vergil both orders Dante to turn around (*Volgiti 'n dietro*) and to close his eyes in the same breath, making it clear that Dante is responsible for his own safety. But Vergil then covers Dante's eyes with his hands, even after Dante turns around, revoking the agency from Dante just as it was bestowed upon him. The circular or redundant structure is also apparent in Dante's spatial orientation in the excerpt.[326] A double turn happens in the same tercet: Dante must *volgiti* away from Medusa in order to then *tornar* back out of hell. If Dante cannot turn unless he turns, he will end up back in the same orientation as before when he was in imminent

[326] Moreover, Dante is in no direct danger from the Furies either: "It is clear that the Erinyes by themselves present no danger to Dante, even though they include themselves in the punitive action of the Medusa. They possess the same serpentine attributes as the Medusa, but they do not have her power. In fact, Virgil had leisurely taken the time to identify them by name one by one. Their appeal to the Medusa, however, prompts an immediate response from Virgil," Russo 2012, 443.

danger. The stasis that results from undoing an action or turn here restages on a micro level the larger problem of delay in Canto 9 while Dante and Vergil wait for the arrival of Mercury, just as the Furies await the arrival of Medusa. Both groups seem to lack a missing component or force to break their paralysis.

The importance of sight to the allegory, coupled with Dante's direct address to the reader to *mirate* (see/look at) the hidden meaning of the allegory, complicates the identification of Mercury by Vergil and Dante. When Dante asks that his reader see the hidden meaning, he concretizes the *dottrina* by reifying it as an object found *sotto 'l velame* ("beneath the veil" *In*.9.63). However, sight alone cannot penetrate or lift the veil, implying that another mediating force is necessary to remove the tangible barrier first. The missing force once again speaks to an environment which lacks the necessary component to make sense of the paralysis of Canto 9. However, there is a powerful exception to problems of the missing mediating force—Vergil's penetrative sight. Remember that not only does Vergil predict the coming of Mercury, he is able to identify him through the darkness of Hell and *quella schiuma antica* ("that ancient foam" *In*.9.74). The opaque, but insubstantial, foam is no hindrance to Vergil's vision. This small detail unravels the supposition that Vergil and Dante are helpless bystanders.

The solution to the allegory of the gorgon is found in the relationship between Vergil, Dante, and Mercury–and the solution is that there is no missing piece of the puzzle. In fact, if we consider the three sisters as a mirror for the three principal characters in the Canto 9 (Dante, Vergil, and Mercury), we see that there is no fourth missing presence or intervention. The Furies wait pointlessly because they cannot recognize that Medusa is not coming and that their threat is not actionable. Dante is not truly in danger and he himself has the power to merely shield his eyes even if Medusa were right in front of him. In other words, Dante, and not Medusa, has the

power here. Dante has the ability to decide, in concert with Vergil, whether to allow Medusa to express or assume any kind of power over them. What we see with Vergil and Dante is the deceitful play between power and powerlessness. They end where they began (they turn back to where they were), because they already had the ability to defend themselves, to see, and to open the gates. They already possess the ability to govern themselves. The question remains, if Vergil and Dante already possess the ability to intervene on their own behalf, why does Mercury need to arrive at all? The arrival of Mercury is not the introduction of a missing mediating force, but the affirmation of this power. Mercury only restages what Dante and Vergil themselves are capable of doing, and have demonstrated, throughout the Canto.

3.) Intruders in the *nusquam* of Hell

The collision of the three different Mercurial figures in Canto 8 and 9 has a profound impact on the regulation and creation of the epic space of Hell because their interaction with the landscape marks Dante's Hell as the same kind of *nusquam* as Aeneas' dream space in *Aeneid* 4. The messenger, Dante, and Vergil all demonstrate the ability to impose their own meaning to the void of Hell because of their designation as intruders.[327] Vergil's fittedness to guide Dante emerges from his exceptional status; he is not damned, he is not Christian, and he is no

[327] Elena Lombardi offers a comprehensive portrait of the trespasser in a triangulation of Dante, Ulysses, and Adam across the *Commedia* to demonstrate that "Desire is trespassing: it is the force, drive, momentum that is in itself neither positive nor negative. It impels the self outside of its limits and borders, toward the other (the beloved, the object of knowledge, God) and both imbalances and satisfies the self, both imperils and saves it. Adam and Ulysses show that desire is both transgressive and necessary. Both lust and charity depend on a very primal, instinctual unbalancing of the self. Adam and Ulysses show that desire is both transgressive and necessary. Both lust and charity depend on a very primal, instinctual unbalancing of the self. Trespassing towards the unknown by means of desire is also what Dante does in his Comedy, as a traveler who, like Ulysses, is concerned about the madness of his enterprise, and as a poet who is aware that his great work is a flight towards the unknown and the forbidden," Elena Lombardi, "The Poetics of Trespassing," In *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy: Volume 3*, edited by George Corbett and Heather Webb, (Open Book Publishers, 2017): 85.

god/angel/hero. Nevertheless, he is the author of the epic underworld and is himself a proven psychopomp. Dante's authority as a translator of ecstatic experience comes from his corporeal state, and as a consequence, his primary mechanism to explore Hell is his physical navigation of it. However, like Mercury, his understanding and control over space is rooted in language and his ability to narrativize what he encounters bodily. Hell, then, as a *nusquam* is a negotiation of meaning that is mediated by language that can signify multiple possibilities moment to moment depending on the interventional lens through which it is viewed. The three Mercurial figures in the *Inferno* represent three such lenses that give shape to and define the boundaries of Hell in their mediation of language and in their capacity as storytellers who impose their meaning onto the space around them.

A brief episode from Statius' *Thebaid* serves as a useful analogy to the tension underpinning the delineation of space here in the *Inferno*. In the middle of a battle, the epic hero Amphiaraus is swallowed up by an earthquake and finds himself in the halls of Hades, having subverted the natural order of life and death. In response to Amphiaraus' invasion, Hades threatens to take up arms against the whole of the cosmos as he claims: *congredior, pereant agedum discrimina rerum* ("I'll join combat: let the boundaries of the realms end!" *The*.8.37). Hades' anger relies upon the supposition that, if the strict delineation of space cannot be maintained, all order collapses. White facing down a potential war of the gods, Amphiaraus is only able to avert the complete dissolution of the cosmic hierarchy through some clever and improvisational turns of phrase.[328] Amphiaraus mollifies Hades by redirecting blame, begging forgiveness, and offering himself up to Hades' mercury.

[328] See *Th*.8.84-126.

In the case of the *Inferno*, the constellation of the three Mercurial figures proposes a solution to the problem of boundaries in Hell by reversing the power dynamic between the intruder and the ruling body of the underworld, Satan. No cosmological constant maintains the space of Hell independently and, in the *Inferno*, the intruder defines boundaries by continually violating them. Canto 8 and 9, which center the intruder, sculpt out the possibilities of what can and cannot be done (or said) within the epic space of the *nusquam*, thereby establishing that alterity is the central organizing principle of the epic space.

Epic Episode

Before discussing the environment of Hell, it is necessary to map out how it is that Canti 8 and 9 together represent a self-contained epic episode that informs the relationship between the Mercurial figure and the creation of space. In a poem of at least 3 different invocations, the *Inferno* affirms Denis Feeney's observation that epic poems contain more than one beginning and end and that they are made up of multiple self-contained episodes.[329] The crisis at the gates of Dis constitutes one such epic episode by borrowing heavily from *Aeneid* 4 and by staging the following epic conventions: Canto 9 begins *in media res*, there is an invocation to the Muse at the end of Canto 8, Vergil recounts his past katabasis, Mercury intervenes, and his descent is conveyed through the use of an epic simile. I have touched on Vergil's katabasis and Mercury's intervention in previous sections, so I will briefly turn to the experience of time and the invocation to the Muse below.

The reader's uncomfortable experience of time between Canto 8 and 9 through the use of the epic motif of *in medias res* reflects both the tension of uncertainty that infects the crisis at the

[329] Philip Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition*. of *Roman Literature and Its Contexts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992: 11-14.

gates of Dis and the subsequent transformation of unproductive speech into productive speech.[330] Canto 8 ends on a promise that is not fulfilled until line 106 of Canto 9:

> Sovr' essa vedestù la scritta morta:
> e già di qua da lei discende l'erta,
> passando per li cerchi sanza scorta,
>
> tal che per lui ne fia la terra aperta
>
> ("above the place where you made out the fatal text;
> and now, already well within that gate,
> across the circles—and alone—descends
>
> the one who will unlock this realm for us" *In*.8.128-130).

But the force of the *già* ("already") is misleading in that Vergil will have time to tell Dante a story about his own past katabasis and provide the reader with an allegory about Medusa. The force of starting Canto 9 *in medias res* joins an epic convention with the unresolved tension at the end of Canto 8 by mirroring for the reader Dante and Vergil's own uncomfortable experience of time. However, in the delay that ensues between Mercury's descent through the gates of Hell until his arrival at the gates of Dis, *la scritta morta* ("dead script") from Canto 3, transforms into efficacious language in Canto 9. The inscription from Canto 3 reads, in part,

> Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create
> se non etterne, e io etterno duro.
>
> ("BEFORE ME NOTHING BUT ETERNAL THINGS
> WERE MADE, AND I ENDURE ETERNALLY" *In*.3.7-8).

However, the purported timelessness and strength (*duro*) of the dead script on the gates to Hell is inert in the face of the arrival of the god of speech and it cannot obstruct his passage. Mercury's speech, full of *parole sante,* redeems the *scritta morta*, just as it does the *parola tronca* after his arrival, opening not just the gates of Dis, but also the gates of Hell from Canto 3 and the very

[330] Teodolinda Barolini, "Inferno 9: Virgilio's Dark Past: From Erichtho to Medusa," Commento Baroliniano, Digital Dante, (New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2018).

terra itself. Like Mercury, the pilgrims transform dead script into productive speech with *versi strani* by using delay to relate Vergil's katabasis and to draft an allegory about Medusa. In so doing, the pilgrims also open up the text to multiple readings while stewing in the uncertainty of the diegetic stasis. The melding of the conventions of genre with the affective experience of uncertainty creates the perfect opening for the invasion of the Mercurial figure. The uncertain status of time that frames the episode reflects both the uncertainty of the direction of the epic, the status of the characters, the rules that define the space of Hell, and who or what governs it.

The struggle to invoke a Muse for the epic episode at the gates of Dis informs the problem of identifying the source of authority in Hell. After the gates are barred to the pilgrims, Dante the pilgrim makes two successive direct addresses, first to the reader and then to Vergil: *Pensa, lettor, se io mi sconfortai* ("Consider, reader, my dismay" *In*.8.94) and then *O caro duca mio… non mi lasciar* ("Oh my dear guide… do not desert me" *In*.8.97-100). At this juncture in the narrative, both pleas for help represent potential invocations to an outside force for assistance with a seemingly insurmountable task. The proximity of both addresses links the reader's experience of time while reading with that of the characters, forcing a temporary collision of experience. However, neither Vergil nor the reader will fill the role of the Muse here. As we see at the beginning of Canto 9, aid arrives from a moment of silence, in a literal gap in speech:

> «Pur a noi converrà vincer la punga»,
> cominciò el, «se non . . . Tal ne s'offerse.
> Oh quanto tarda a me ch'altri qui giunga!».
>
> (""We have to win this battle," he began,
> "if not. . . But one so great had offered help.
> How slow that someone's coming to see me!" *In*.9.7-9).

Whatever powers Dante invokes at the end of Canto 8 from the reader or from Vergil, here, the intervening force reflexively offers itself (*s'offerse*). Mercury's aid, which will open the gates of Dis, arises from a spontaneous and a silent invocation, from out of the nature of the situation

itself. Instead of an explanation, the text offers silence. The Mercurial figure appears in the gap between stasis and action and between the reader and the characters in the space of the conditional phrase (*se non*).

Vergilian *nusquam*

The gap created by the conditional phrase, *se non*, in which the Mercurial figure exists, informs the unstable nature of the environment of Hell. As Canto 8 and 9 make clear, The Hell of the *Inferno* is a void or *nusquam* created and governed by language that can only be understood through the Mercurial figure's participation in it. Like the quantum field of possibilities that Aeneas' dream represents in *Aeneid* 4, Hell in the *Inferno* constitutes various strands of traditions that only become activated by the intrusion of a Mercurial figure who gives them shape through their own compositional powers. Each expression of an alternate reality within the *nusquam* constitutes the collision of the imagination and the lived reality of any one intruder within it, and each collision generates an emergent idea that is distinct from and parallel to other possible outcomes. On a fundamental level, the queer nature of Karen Barad's void applied to the space of Hell allows for multiple contradictory outcomes to coexist without conflict.

Mercury only intervenes in the *Inferno* once and then disappears from the text because his command and body become inscribed on the landscape in Canto 9 so that he is ever present. The process by which the inscription happens is fundamentally different from allegorical readings that situate Mercury in the body of Dante or Vergil; the process is not an act of internalization but that of externalization.[331] After Mercury opens the gates of Dis without resistance (*che non v'ebbe alcun ritegno*) using his *verghetta*, he briefly addresses the demons

[331] For example, see David Quint (1975) and Susanna Barsella (2010) who see Mercury's appearance as an eruption of internal conflict for Dante about his reliance on classical antecedents.

obstructing Dante's journey: *O cacciati del ciel, gente dispetta», / cominciò elli in su l'orribil soglia*, ("O you cast out of Heaven, hated crowd," / were his first words upon that horrid threshold" *In.*9.90-92). Right away, the text demonstrates the cosmological and spatial gulf between Mercury and the demons as the *da ciel messo* collides with the *cacciati del ciel* at this critical *soglia* (threshold) by construing their authority by degrees of separation from the location of heaven. In other words, the hierarchy at play here is dependent upon the recognition of one's relationship to and ability to navigate space. Mercury's appearance briefly renders the spatial division irrelevant by bridging the physical touch of the *verghetta* with the *sante parole* (holy words) of his language. The temporary collision of language and touch affirms that the efficacy of his intervention will outlast his physical appearance, since Vergil and Dante will not be impeded in the *Inferno* again. What is crucial for our purposes is the fact that Mercury does not speak to nor alter Dante or Vergil in any way. The pilgrims are not now imbued with greater authority or power after Mercury's appearance. It is simply the case that the landscape of hell has been transformed to accommodate them.

Dante and Vergil's epic journey exists between the departing Mercury and his language; the narrative of the *Inferno* then forms the interstitial mass between them. The vectors of the language and the speaker continue to exist, just along different trajectories than the emergent reality of the pilgrims' journey. This creates three simultaneous, and equally authentic, experiences of hell. After Mercury delivers his speech to the demons guarding the gates of Dis the text reads,

> Poi si rivolse per la strada lorda,
> e non fé motto a noi, ma fé sembiante
> d'omo cui altra cura stringa e morda

che quella di colui che li è davante;
e noi movemmo i piedi inver' la terra,
sicuri appresso le parole sante.

Dentro li 'ntrammo sanz' alcuna guerra;

("He then turned and took the filthy road,
and did not speak to us, but had the look
of one who is obsessed by other cares

than those that press and gnaw at those before him;
and we moved forward, on into the city,
in safety, having heard his holy words

We made our way inside without a struggle" *In*.9.100-105).

Though Mercury does not speak to the pilgrims, Dante and Vergil move forward *appresso* (after/behind/following) Mercury's holy words. The words depart from the speaker and move forward into Hell even as Mercury himself *rivolse* ("turned back") along the *strada lorda* ("filthy road"). The words become inscribed in the environment itself, having transformed it and made it safe for the pilgrims. Mercury's language, like Dante's, creates the conditions/rules of Hell in real time. Words moving with a forward momentum independently of the speaker to manifest the physical space that makes navigation or intelligibility possible. In the epic space, we can only interact with or touch that which we create through linguistic participation.

The interstitial space of the *nusquam* is also timeless, allowing for past and future manifestations to be true simultaneously. This property of the *nusquam* reframes Mercury's entrance as he *al passo / passava* ("was passing over the Styx with his step" *In*.9.80-81). William Franke construes line 80 independently by playing off the double meaning of *passo*, which would read: *fuggir così dinanzi ad un ch'al passo* ("he fled just as before in that other passage").[332] We have seen previously how, in numerous instances, that allusions to *Aeneid* 4

[332] Franke 1994, 11-19.

would provide a suitable basis for the *passo*, but it is worth noting a few more allusions here at the conclusion of Mercury's intervention to demonstrate the relationship between intertextuality and time. Though Mercury does not speak more than once, he makes the appearance/semblance (*fé sembiante*) of a man concerned by an *altra cura*. The line here betrays that this is merely Dante's reading or interpretation of the figure, just as Aeneas' understanding of Mercury's third intervention is based on his interpretation of a figure *similis a Mercurio* (*Aen*.4.558). In addition, the final line of the Canto casts the episode as if it were a classical epic struggle or *guerra* (war). But the passage also evokes *Aeneid* 6, when the Mercurial hero traverses the river Styx through the aid of a magic wand:

> quod si tantus amor menti, si tanta cupido est
> bis Stygios innare lacus, bis nigra videre
> Tartara, et insano iuvat indulgere labori,
> accipe quae peragenda prius. latet arbore opaca
> aureus et foliis et lento vimine ramus,
> Iunoni infernae dictus sacer;
>
> ("But if such desire is in your mind, such a longing
> to sail the Stygian lake twice, and twice see Tartarus,
> and if it delights you to indulge in insane effort,
> listen to what you must first undertake. Hidden in a dark tree
> is a golden bough, golden in leaves and pliant stem,
> sacred to Persephone, the underworld's Juno" *Aen*.6.133-138).

Aeneas, like Mercury in *Inferno* 9, is only able to traverse (*rivolse*) the river Styx twice (*bis*) through the use of the *vimine* or magic wand. A feat Aeneas is only able to accomplish by imitating the god of speech. These few extra points of similarity make it clear that there is not just a single reading of the *passo* because multiple allusions may exist simultaneously. What is most important is that the turn backwards represents a spatial and historical distance that reaches into the epic past. But the return with the iterative *ri-* attached to the *volse* demonstrates that the journey to or from the epic past is repeatable. Mercury's intervention is always an incomplete and never-ending recitation.

The epic episode of Canto 8 and 9 concerns three different Mercurial interventions operating in three different timelines: Mercury's return to the epic past of the *Aeneid* happens concurrently with Dante's emergent experience of Hell and Vergil's own past katabasis in service of Erichtho. Canti 8 and 9 are crucial for the staging of the collision of these different Mercurial interventions because the threat of narrative paralysis presents numerous possibilities for the direction of the diegesis, the gates themselves occupy a liminal space between the liminal space of Hell and Limbo, and Dante the living intruder's status has not yet been decided. The intervention of the messenger forms a distinct episode within the poem, a counter-space governed by tension between competing Mercurial figures. It is a counter space where multiple outcomes present themselves, Dante's death, the arrival of Medusa, the ending of his journey, etc. In the web of possible outcomes, we learn that no single Mercurial figure is necessary because there is space for all three simultaneously in the unstable *nusquam* of Hell. After Mercury's intervention Dante is able to move forward, confident in his non-status when his *desio* to see meets his navigation/invasion of the space, as we see in the last line of Canto 9 when he takes up a position halfway between speech and space: *tra i martìri e li alti spaldi* ("between the torments and high walls" *In.*9.133). The first two lines of Canto 10 affirm Dante's liminal status now free of the direct influence of Mercury as he walks *Ora sen va per un secreto calle, / tra 'l muro de la terra e li martìri*, ("Now, by a narrow path that ran between / those torments and the ramparts of the city" *In.*10.1-2).

Silence and Spacetime in Canto 26

The stakes of both the Mercurial intervention in Canto 8 and 9 and the governance of the *nusquam* are tremendous insofar as they inform two of the most important subjects of debate surrounding the *Inferno*, Odysseus' death in Canto 26 and the depiction of Satan in Canto 34.[333]

The intervention of the Mercurial figure and its authority over the *nusquam* make the perennially confounding story of Odysseus' death in Canto 26 consistent with the logic of Barad's quantum field. Deep within the darkest recesses of Hell, after Dante's condemnation of Florence, but before reaching the ninth and final circle, Dante and Vergil encounter Odysseus and Diomedes trapped in a fork tongued flame.[334] The crime for which the Homeric heroes burn is not immediately clear as the text provides a few different options, from false counsel to theft.[335] Nevertheless, part of what makes this Canto so striking is the fact that Odysseus narrates the majority of the Canto and provides an alternative conclusion to his voyage as depicted in Homer's *Odyssey.* In the story according to Canto 26, Odysseus and his entire crew drown while sailing beyond the Pillars of Hercules (*In*.26.90-142). This divergence from the Homeric account is a novel invention of the *Inferno* and would have contradicted a fourteenth century readership's understanding of classical epic.[336] Among the numerous threads that have been and continue to be debated at length about Odysseus' narration, I will focus here on the contrast between the

[333] Odysseus' death in particular has inspired numerous analyses due to its apparent dismissal of well-known mythological conventions. For a thorough history of the reception of the Ulysses narrative in Canto 26, see Francesca Schironi, "A Hero Without 'Nostos': Ulysses' Last Voyage in Twentieth-Century Italy," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 22, no. 3 (2015): 341–79.

[334] The episode takes up the majority of Canto 26: *In*.26.31-142.

[335] James Truscott outlines the possible crimes of which Ulysses is guilty: James G. Truscott, "Ulysses and Guido: (Inf. XXVI-XXVII)," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 91 (1973): 47–72.

[336] Lino Pertile summarizes the latest scholarship on Odysseus and the divergences of the hero's account of his death from those of classical sources: Lino Pertile, *Ulysses and the Limits of Dante's Humanism = Ulisse o Dei Limiti Dell'umanesimo Dantesco / Lino Pertile,* (Florence, Italy: I Tatti, 2023).

productive speech of the Mercurial figure and the unproductive lies of the Homeric heroes.

Odysseus' non-canonical death at sea occurs within a liminal zone between space and time, under the direction of Vergil and at the behest of Dante. As the pilgrims approach Odysseus and Diomedes, Dante asks,

> «S'ei posson dentro da quelle faville
> parlar», diss' io, «maestro, assai ten priego
> e ripriego, che 'l priego vaglia mille,
>
> che non mi facci de l'attender niego
> fin che la fiamma cornuta qua vegna;
> vedi che del disio ver' lei mi piego!».
>
> Ed elli a me: «La tua preghiera è degna
> di molta loda, e io però l'accetto;
> ma fa che la tua lingua si sostegna.
>
> Lascia parlare a me, ch'i' ho concetto
> ciò che tu vuoi; ch'ei sarebbero schivi,
> perch' e' fuor greci, forse del tuo detto».
>
> ('"If they can speak within those sparks," I said,
> "I pray you and repray and, master, may
> my prayer be worth a thousand pleas, do not
>
> forbid my waiting here until the flame
> with horns approaches us; for you can see
> how, out of my desire, I bend toward it."
>
> And he to me: "What you have asked is worthy
> of every praise; therefore, I favor it.
> I only ask you this: refrain from talking.
>
> Let me address them—I have understood
> what you desire of them. Since they were Greek,
> perhaps they'd be disdainful of your speech"' *In.*26.64-75).

Whatever is happening within the flame is not intelligible, readable, or self-evident to Dante's gaze and requires mediation to translate the experience from a visual spectacle into speech. The intervention begins with a *preghiera…degna* (worthy prayer) not unlike an epic invocation. By activating Vergil through repeated praying (*priego…ripriego*), Dante construes the events of the

Canto as another epic episode that requires a Mercurial intervention. In place of Mercury, Vergil steps in so as to avoid confusing the Greek heroes with Dante's *detto* (speech). The excuse of a language barrier is, of course, a superficial reading, and Dante's familiarity with Greek remains a controversial topic.[337] Nevertheless, the metaphor of translation from Greek into Italian mirrors Dante's request that Vergil bridge the physical distance between themselves and the heroes. Dante cannot comprehend the physical torment or read the *contrapasso* in the flame without bringing past and present, Greek and Italian, guide and pilgrim into physical contact. But there is a gulf between a worthy prayer and the tongue (*la lingua*) that speaks it. And while the cost of invoking Vergil's aid is Dante's silence, of course the diegesis belongs to Dante the poet at all times, so the sacrifice of agency here is playful. Though Dante *lascia parlare* (leaves the speaking) to Vergil, Dante dictates Vergil's intervention. Both pilgrims are and are not subjects and guides. Both states of being coexist for the purposes of this intervention. One does not supersede or replace the other. Both seemingly contradictory power dynamics are true at the same time.

The nature of the flame is crucial here both because it acts as a metaphor for language, but also because of the way in which it joins Odysseus and Diomedes into a single punished

[337] Fosca succinctly lays out the two primary positions on the exchange: Perché questa richiesta di Virgilio? Molte le ipotesi formulate dagli studiosi. Per alcuni si fa qui riferimento alla proverbiale superbia dei Greci (menzionata da Dante in *Rime* LXXII.6). Secondo i più, è Virgilio che deve parlare in quanto anello di congiunzione fra civiltà greca antica e civiltà medievale latina (che non leggeva il greco), in quanto cioè appartenente ad una cultura affine a quella degli eroi ("Why this request of Vergil? Many hypotheses have been formulated by scholars. According to some, a reference is being made to the proverbial arrogance of the Greeks (Mentioned by Dante in *Rime* LXXII.6). According to the majority, it is Vergil that has to speak as a link between the ancient Greek civilization and the medieval Latin civilization (that does not read Greek), since he belongs to a culture similar to that of the heroes"), cited from the commentary to *Inferno*, XXVI.70-75 by Nicola Fosca, (The Dartmouth Dante Project, 2003-2015), as found in the Dartmouth Dante Project.

body.[338] The flame itself appears to speak when Odysseus recounts the story of his ill-fated voyage: *Lo maggior corno de la fiamma antica…come fosse la lingua che parlasse* ("The greater horn within that ancient flame…as if it were a tongue that tried to speak" *In*.26.85-89). But the nature of the flame and its movements in the Canto reveal that the story that the fiery tongue relates does not originate from a single cohesive voice. When Dante first sees the flame that contains Odysseus and Diomedes he asks,

> chi è 'n quel foco che vien sì diviso
> di sopra, che par surger de la pira
> dov' Eteòcle col fratel fu miso?
>
> ("Who is within the flame that comes so twinned
> above that it would seem to rise out of
> the pyre Eteocles shared with his brother?" *In*.26.52-54).

Diomedes, silent and yet full of rage, cannot touch or collide with the loquacious Odysseus, who attempts to make sense of a senseless reimagining of a classical story. Their incompatibility is mirrored in their forked flame as they repel one another like Eteocles and Polynices from the *Thebaid*.[339] The dyad of the false counselors in Canto 26 represents an imperfect foil to the three Mercurial figures because it lacks a third mediating Mercurial force.

While Dante claims that Vergil's authority speak to Odysseus derives from his own *li alti versi* ("noble/high verses" *In*.26.82), it is actually his ability to select the right time and place to address the epic heroes that allows him to interface with the epic past. Before Dante and Vergil

[338] For a small sampling of research about the relationship between flame and tongue in Inferno 26 see Ronald Herzman, "'Io Non Enëa, Io Non Paolo Sono': Ulysses, Guido Da Montefeltro, and Franciscan Traditions in the Commedia," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 123 (2005): 23–69; Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Ulysses: Persuasion vs. Prophecy," in *Lectura Dantis: Infemo*, edited by Allen Mandelbaum, Anthony Oldcom, and Charles Ross (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 348-56; and James Truscott, "Ulysses and Guido: (Inf. XXVI-XXVII)," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 91 (1973): 47–72.

[339] Truscott 1973, 56-57.

can converse with Odysseus and Diomedes, Vergil must first find a gap into which he can insert himself:

> Poi che la fiamma fu venuta quivi
> dove parve al mio duca tempo e loco,
> in questa forma lui parlare audivi:
>
> ("And when my guide adjudged the flame had reached
> a point where time and place were opportune,
> this was the form I heard his words assume" *In*.26.76-78).

The Mercurial figure intervenes in the precise space between *tempo* (time) and *loco* (place) through the imposition of his speech (*parlare*) onto the divided flame of language (*la fiamma*). This is an intervention that neither Odysseus nor Diomedes can make themselves because they refuse to collide and remain forever stuck in stasis. The space between space and time, where Vergil introduces his intervention, is the *se non* or *nusquam*. Without the aid of the Mercurial intervention, the fraudulent counselors would be unable to transform the roiling energy of their flame into a compelling narrative. Their story only becomes a credible alternative to conventional accounts of Odysseus' story through the introduction of the Mercurial intervention between space and time that creates a parallel track to the epic tradition. Only in the parallel *nusquam* running parallel to the epic tradition can Odysseus' new story (and death) exist.

The gap of the *nusquam* between space and time allows Odysseus' voyage to run parallel to the diegesis of the *Inferno*. What Odysseus identifies as the *mondo senza gente* ("world without people" *In*.26.117). beyond the Pillars of Hercules is a liminal zone distinct from Purgatory, the mountainous goal of Odysseus' voyage.[340] Odysseus mistakes the unpeopled void of his non-canonical voyage for the mountain of Purgatory. The *mondo senza gente* is a liminal zone between the liminal zone of Purgatory that Odysseus cannot reach on his own without a

[340] See Lombardi 2017, 80-85 for the confusion of Odysseus' desires.

mediating Mercurial force. This is why his voyage ends in failure; his crime is mistaking one liminal zone for the other. The Mercurial intervention of Vergil and Dante recuperates Odysseus' story by giving it the appropriate space to exist alongside the epic narrative. Odysseus' epic revision can be true, even if it contradicts Homeric precedent and common knowledge, only once the Mercurial intervention situates it within the *nusquam*, where the distinction between the truth and the lie, history and fiction, is irrelevant.

Three Headed Satan

Just as the dyad of Odysseus and Diomedes acts as an incomplete foil to the Mercurial heroes, so too does Satan in Canto 34 represent an unactualized Mercurial potential, which is incapable of governing the *nusquam* of Hell. Before leaving Hell for Purgatory, Dante and Vergil must make physical contact with Satan by using his body as a ladder. Their descent *tra 'l folto pelo e le gelate croste* ("between the tangled hair and icy crusts" *In*.34.75) of Satan's body restages Mercury's descent in *Aeneid* 4 when the messenger momentarily stops on the mountain of Atlas on his journey to Carthage:

> illa fretus agit ventos et turbida tranat
> nubila. iamque volans apicem et latera ardua cernit
> Atlantis duri caelum qui vertice fulcit,
> Atlantis, cinctum adsidue cui nubibus atris
> piniferum caput et vento pulsatur et imbri,
> nix umeros infusa tegit, tum flumina mento
> praecipitant senis, et glacie riget horrida barba.
> hic primum paribus nitens Cyllenius alis
> constitit
>
> ("Now in his flight he saw the steep flanks and the summit of strong Atlas, who holds the heavens on his head, Atlas, whose pine-covered crown is always wreathed in dark clouds and lashed by the wind and rain: fallen snow clothes his shoulders: while rivers fall from his ancient chin, and his rough beard bristles with ice. There Cyllenian Mercury first halted").[341]

[341] *Aen*.4.244-253.

Satan, the icy *creatura (In*.34.18), who is more of a stony feature of the landscape than a character, mirrors Atlas and his frozen *barba* at this transitional moment in the narrative. Like Atlas in the passage above, Satan is a broken *scala* ("bridge" *In*.34.119) between realms, who cannot speak because he is also fixed to the earth: *da mezzo 'l petto uscia fuor de la ghiaccia* ("towered from the ice, up from midchest" *In*.34.29). Satan uses his mouth to gnash only: *Da ogne bocca dirompea co' denti / un peccatore, a guisa di maciulla* ("Within each mouth—he used it like a grinder— with gnashing teeth he tore to bits a sinner" *In*.34.55-56). Satan has no real power to rewrite or restage anything through language on his own as a result.[342]

There is a superficial relationship between Satan, the great deceiver, and the Mercurial figure who mobilizes deception for the purposes of their intervention. But just as the Mercury of the *Aeneid* temporarily collides with his grandfather and goes on to enjoy a freedom of movement that Atlas does not, so too does the pilgrims' temporary use of Satan serve to highlight the differences in the efficacy of their deception. Satan's immobility and inability speak to his powerlessness outside of his immediate location. This is in stark contrast to the mobility of the Mercurial heroes who make their own space for their intervention. When the Mercurial heroes climb out of Hell, they do so in a space *di tempo e loco* ("between time and space" *In*.34.71), just as they did when interfacing with Odysseus in Canto 26. The pilgrims are able to carve out a space for themselves even on the body of Satan, which remains submerged in the rocks of Hell. Mercury has already opened the *terra* to Vergil and Dante in Canto 9 and so his words continue to echo across the landscape of the *nusquam*, so, as a mountain in the fashion of Atlas, Satan is also subject to the inscription of Mercury's authority over the landscape. The

[342] As Rowan Williams notes, "The end of the Inferno is shaped around images of stasis; nothing really moves in Hell, despite appearances," Rowan Williams, "Ice, Fire and Holy Water," In *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy: Volume 3*, edited by George Corbett and Heather Webb, (Open Book Publishers, 2017); 217.

contrast between Satan and the pilgrims provides a model for thinking through Dante's final exhortation to his reader. When Dante addresses the reader for the last time in Canto 34, he claims for himself a liminal status:

> Com' io divenni allor gelato e fioco,
> nol dimandar, lettor, ch'i' non lo scrivo,
> però ch'ogne parlar sarebbe poco.
>
> Io non mori' e non rimasi vivo;
> pensa oggimai per te, s'hai fior d'ingegno,
> qual io divenni, d'uno e d'altro privo.
>
> ("O reader, do not ask of me how I
> grew faint and frozen then—I cannot write it:
> all words would fall far short of what it was.
>
> I did not die, and I was not alive;
> think for yourself, if you have any wit,
> what I became, deprived of life and death" *In*.34.22-27).

Though he is *gelato* like Satan, he is not fixed in place. He cannot write (*scrivo*) what he is as he has become the bodily instrument of the Mercurial intervention. To speak (*parlar*) of his transformation would be a trivial or small thing (*poco*) because the Mercurial figure mobilizes speech to transform the world around him. Dante represents the continual collision of word and deed that makes Hell legible to his reader. Dante begs the reader to consider what exists between life and death at the conclusion of his journey through hell, and the answer resides in his role as the Mercurial interlocutor.

Dante and Vergil wield the power of deception as Mercurial figures, but their deception mobilizes and authors paradiegetic traditions unlike Satan, the great deceiver, and even Odysseus and Diomedes, who are stuck in ice or flames respectively. The Mercurial is transformative and represents a healthy alternative. Satan's failure, just like Atlas' failure, is the support structure or scaffolding of the universe, but it is infertile. Its offspring, the Mercurial, never stops moving. As the voice and patron saint of the epic narrative, the Mercurial figure reveals that epic poetry is

not about the past or representing a traditional space since the past is not actually the source for the epic diegesis. Atlas or Satan can never break free of their stasis so long as they do not engage with the Mercurial lie. Epic springs from the Mercurial fount that has no limits in its queer navigation of the infinite possibilities of space.

Conclusion

The identification of the intervening figure in Canto 9 has profound consequences on the nature of deception, speech, and the creation of space within the *nusquam* of Hell. A reevaluation of the Mercurial figure demonstrates that the tension between Vergil and Dante in Canto 8 and 9 is not a simple matter of a Christian force correcting the failure of a pagan worldview. As we have seen, the form of the intervention is no angel, complicating the simple corrective reading anyways. The delay at the gates of Dis does not stage a classical failure, but a collision of competing models of Mercurial speech in the epic episode where three Mercurial outcomes authorize three different strains of authorial power simultaneously. Canto 9 stages the collision that makes the *nusquam* legible because it addresses the transitional space at the boundary of the kingdom of Hell. It is not that Vergil or Dante are incapable or powerless to intervene; both demonstrate their ability to manipulate the landscape inside and outside of the diegesis. What is missing here is the violent convergence of competing perspectives. The Mercurial exists at the point of rupture. Dante and Vergil must be at odds temporarily in order to reaffirm that both Mercurial heroes may author simultaneous and distinct traditions.

Once Mercury's speech opens the *terra* by inscribing itself on the landscape, the text is no longer beholden to a single history or literary tradition. Dante and Vergil are able to rewrite or authorize new traditions in real time. This possibility explains how and why Odysseus' story conflicts with Homeric precedent inside of Dis. The future is not fixed in the epic diegesis and is

subject to change. When Mercury intervenes, he creates a new vector or tradition that is not beholden to other traditions. The process by which this happens is not internalization, as many allegorical interpretations of the Canto argue. Mercury's deception is embodied in the herald's person but becomes inscribed on the land itself as he unlocks the realm in an act of externalization and this how the messenger can guarantee that Dante will no longer meet with resistance. The Mercurial figure authors the physical *forma* that exists at a cross-section of time (*tempo*) and space (*loco*) where the epic diegesis takes place. As a *nusquam*, Hell is neither static nor prescriptive; it allows for endless variation. There is no reason that a living person cannot be damned or that Odysseus cannot have died at sea, whatever the historical reality or common belief.

The authorial power of the Mercurial figure stands in a stark contrast to that of Satan in Canto 34, who represents the inert, motionless, and unactualized lie. The crime of betrayal at the depths of hell is a fruitless and unproductive lie that does not generate, facilitate, or move. The only outcome is a frozen and wordless paralysis of the same kind that binds Atlas to the Earth in *Aeneid* 4. Satan is, after all, less of a character and more of a piece of the landscape of hell, which has already yielded to Mercury's intervention. The three headed Satan is no match for the three combined forces of Dante, Vergil, and Mercury.

Canto 9 reveals that it is intruders who sculpt out the possibilities of what can and cannot be done or said in the epic form.[343] The Mercurial intruder governs the para-diegetic space of the *nusquam* that comes into being where multiple strains of Mercurial intervention collide. It is a

[343] The push and pull of competing Mercurial models reflects what Lombardi sees in Dante's impulse to move back and forth through his classical antecedents and the needs of his contemporary literary goals: "Dante's present is in the encounter of these two forces; the forward drive of the future epic and the sweet call of the lyric past: one never overcomes the other, and both make the originality and greatness of the *Comedy*," Lombardi 2017, 85.

kind of queer quantum field, where all narrative outcomes reside simultaneously. The Mercurial is that which directs and selects the outcomes. It is the arbitrating force that limits the parameters of the diegesis. In this space, lies are no different than the truth since all possibilities coexist simultaneously in the *nusquam*. As a result, the application of the Mercurial figure also demonstrates that alterity is the basis for the direction of epic genre insofar as no one dominant reading subsumes another. The truth of Vergil's pagan experiences of Hell does not contradict Dante's Christian interpretation of the same environment. To ask of an epic poem whether it is pro or anti Augustan, pro or anti imperial power is to miss a foundational truth of the genre, which is that the power does not reside in a single Apolline register or in the dissolution of Dionysiac language. Zeus is not in control of the reigns.

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CONCLUSION

Rather than subsume Hermes/Mercury into a larger allegorical schema, I have placed the elusive god at the center of an interpretive model that explains how the epic form is in constant flux and invites so many impassioned and disparate readings in its adaptation and iteration. In the paratextual *nusquam*, the Mercury figure is isolated from all literary conventions that would limit the scope of what is and is not possible for the narrative. Free from the push and pull of the mandates of Jupiter, the Mercurial figure's lies mobilize alternative stories just as particles populate the void with infinite possibilities. The evasion of narrative stasis by means of the lies of the Mercurial intervention affirms that there is no single proscriptive reading of the epic narrative. Aeneas can be a wild beast, Dido can be an epic hero, and Odysseus can be lost to sea because the Mercurial figure makes space for all eventualities at once in the *nusquam*.

In archaic Greek *epos*, I show how the oscillation of Hermes' conflicted *timai* makes him the true god of the epic form. A recuperation of Nietzsche's Apolline and Dionysiac dyad puts into stark relief the different impulses of Hermes' complex *timai* and provides a framework for making sense of the fraught relationship between authority and the presentation or delivery of that authority within the epic mode. The tension between closure and endless violence, that has been the subject of countless academic inquiries, is explained by the movement of Hermes between his desire to deliver Zeus' directives faithfully as the Apolline herald and to undermine his father's authority as the Dionysiac trickster. However, I demonstrate that this is not a problem that needs to be solved and that the impulse of some scholars to domesticate Hermes into a stable mythological hierarchy is misguided. Hermes alone among the gods recognizes that the epic form is elastic, and it is this fact that bestows authority upon him to regulate it.

The *Aeneid* stages the failure of the Dionysiac and Apolline roles of the archaic Hermes and demonstrates, through the creation of the paradiegetic space of the *nusquam* within Aeneas' dream, that multiple traditions and readings are possible at once within the text, despite Jupiter's insistence on a single preordained outcome. It is only within the *nusquam* that Mercury can oscillate freely and instantaneously between his Apolline and Dionysiac roles. The lie, governed by the Mercurial figure in the *nusquam*, is the form of possible narrative outcomes that can find expression only within the void of the dream as Mercury moves continually between closure and catastrophe. A critical reevaluation of Mercury's small role within the *Aeneid* demonstrates that the epic herald is the ancient equivalent of the observer of Karen Barad's theory of agential realism who measures, moment to moment, the state of the narrative. The remarkable nature of Mercury's interventions is that he is both subject to and author of the direction of the epic diegesis.

A reevaluation of the identity of the heavenly messenger (*da ciel messo*) in Canto 9 in Dante's *Inferno* demonstrates how the authority to direct the epic narrative arises from competing Mercurial trespassers. By taking the identity of the unnamed interlocutor at the gates of Dis seriously and aligning its function and mission to that of the Mercurial figure, we can begin to unpack the controversial relationship of Dante to Vergil and the poem's treatment of its classical antecedents. Though many have condemned or defended Vergil for his apparent failure to facilitate Dante's journey to Dis, my reading of the Mercurial figure's inscription of authority onto the land of hell, thereby designating the space a *nusquam*, allows Vergil and Dante the pilgrim to assume for themselves their own *auctoritas* without conflict. In the *nusquam* of hell, both Vergil and Dante the pilgrim represent Mercurial figures responsible for authoring their own truths simultaneously, despite their apparent incongruities with established historical

precedents or world views.

Future Project

Given the framework that I have laid out in this dissertation, future projects on the Mercurial figure will explore the reception of the messenger god in early-modern English literature with a view to tracing how the figure becomes embedded in the modern reimagination of the classical past. Whereas my dissertation has focused nearly exclusively on the space of the *nusquam* and how the Mercurial figure makes space for alternative readings, I intend to explore how the Mercurial figure influences the concept of time as Greek, Latin, Italian, and then English traditions converge in the literature of the early-modern period.

Though my project ends with Dante in Italy during the 14th century, the presence of the Mercurial figure becomes firmly entrenched in early-modern English literature as English authors adapt and respond to Italian source materials on the page and on the stage in their imagination of space. For example, Chaucer's inset story of "The Knight's Tale," a reinterpretation of Boccaccio's 14th century epic poem *Teseida*, imagines epic space as the intersection of Bronze Age Greece, by way of a Latin epic that is reinvented first in a medieval Italian context before Chaucer stages the story in Middle English. Within the complex historical and literary triangulation of *The Canterbury Tales*, it is the Mercurial figure's lies that allow for the authorization of new narrative vectors even while adapting older literary texts.

The reconsideration of the Mercurial figure allows us to parse how reception responds to literary antecedents and allows for the establishment of new traditions in new spaces unbound by precedent, location, language, or time. The development of the *nusquam* and Mercury's role within it provides a new vocabulary for dealing with moments of tension and narrative stasis

when Mercury appears before the hero Arcite in a dream in "The Knight's Tale." It is my contention that, when Mercury promises that Arcite will find an "ende" (1392) to his suffering, the promised end is not a destination nor is it situated in space, but in time. Here, the Mercurial figure collapses time and the long gulf between ancient Greece and early modern England into a single moment that brings the epic story to a conclusion at an instant that transpires in the past and the future simultaneously.

According to Richard Hoffman in *Ovid and the Canterbury Tales*, "something more than one-tenth of the total volume of Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" consists of lines which are 'absolutely new,'" the rest of the piece being a mixture of translation and extrapolation of Boccaccio's *Teseida,* the primary source of Chaucer's story.[344] Arcite's dream of Mercury (lines 1380-1398) stands among Chaucer's few original contributions to Boccaccio's narrative. While Hoffman's work looks primarily to Ovid as a possible source for this scene, Mercury's intercession bears a remarkable resemblance to the form *omnia Mercurio similis* ("similar to Mercury in every way," 4.558)[345] in Book 4 of Vergil's *Aeneid* that incites the delaying hero Aeneas, in a dream, to depart the shores of Carthage for his destined kingdom in Italy. Though work has been done to demonstrate that Chaucer had Vergil's *Aeneid* in mind, "if not on his desk," when composing "The Knight's Tale," and that the source text for Arcite's dream of Mercury is most likely *Aeneid* 4, there has been scant work in the last thirty years to return to the pesky god in detail.[346] Like Vergil, Chaucer employs the divine herald in "The Knight's Tale" to

[344] Hoffman 1966, 39.

[345] English translations of *The Aeneid* from A.S. Kline.

[346] William Coleman, "The Knight's Tale." In *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales: Vol. II*, edited by Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, (Boydell & Brewer, 2005) 87. For a comprehensive accounting of Chaucer's familiarity with Virgil see Christopher Baswell, *Virgil in Medieval England: Figuring the* Aeneid *from the Twelfth Century to Chaucer,* (Cambridge, U.K., 1995). For a detailed

serve as guide and psychopomp, at a crucial juncture in the narrative where the hero's delay leads to narrative stasis. In Chaucer's adaptation of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, Mercury facilitates the translation of both time and culture textually at a figurative and literal crossroads. Mercury is the lynchpin that transforms one cultural and literary context into a new tradition in Chaucer's adaptation where ancient Rome, Italy, and medieval England intersect. What Mercury stages in his intervention in "The Knight's Tale" is the collapse of history, literature, space, and time in a single conclusion that happens simultaneously in the future and the past.

The story of *The Knight's Tale* revolves around a love triangle that catches the attention of the Greco-Roman gods. After the cousins Arcite and Palamoun are imprisoned by king Theseus, they fall in love with Emelye, a member of the king's court, whom they observe through the window of their jail cell. The central conflict of the story revolves around their competition for Emelye's affections after both cousins find their way to freedom. Arcite is pardoned by the king after the intercession of a friend on the condition that he not return to Athens; Palamoun, on the other hand, eventually escapes from captivity while Arcite wanders the countryside. Due to the interference of Mercury, the cousins' paths converge, and they end up in a duel to the death with the winner gaining Emelye's hand in marriage. As the cousins battle throughout the poem, the Greco-Roman gods take an active interest in their conflict and attempt to sway the outcome based on each character's devotion to them.

The pagan cosmology of *The Knight's Tale* is an extrapolation of a series of prayers that the characters make to their patron gods in Boccaccio's *Teseida*, but in "The Knight's Tale," the gods take a more active role in bringing the poem's conflict to a resolution. The narrative of inset

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comparison of Chaucer's Mercury to Vergil's Mercury, see Bryant W. Bachman, ""Mercury, Virgil, and Arcite: 'Canterbury Tales', A 1384-1397," *English Language Notes 13* (1976): 168-73, and in particular Wolfgang Rudat Wolfgang, "Chaucer's Mercury and Arcite: The 'Aeneid' and the World of the 'Knight's Tale,'" *Neophilologus* 64 (2), 1980: 307-319.

story is divided between a brother' quarrel over the love of Emelye on Earth and the councils of the pagan gods in the heavens and "The personality of each pagan is defined in relation to the personality of his special god; the strengths and weaknesses of each god are mirrored by his worshipper."[347] Within this paradigm, however, Mercury is an outlier as he has no mortal analogue. In the quest to decipher how Mercury fits into various allegorical models, critics have turned to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and have considered parallels between the death of Argus in Book 1 to the death of Arcite, one of Emelye's two suitors. However, the exchange hinges on much the same problem of deception and reorientation that I outline in Chapter 2 for Aeneas' dream of Mercury in *Aeneid* 4 in that Mercury mobilizes the lie in order to evade the threat of stasis when Arcite is poised to step away from the violent conclusion of his love story.

Mercury's intervention in the second half of *Knight's Tale* reorients the character and shepherds Arcite to his death in his capacity as the psychopomp in order to evade the threat of narrative stasis. Here, as in *Teseida*, king Theseus releases Arcite from captivity after Perotheus (Perithous to Boccaccio), during a trip to Athens, speaks on his behalf. Arcite departs from Theseus with a warning from the king that, should Arcite be caught in Athens again, he will forfeit his life (1211-1215). Distraught that his freedom would cost him the love of Emelye, Arcite laments in exile that "For seen his lady shal he nevere mo" (1357). After "he endured hadde a yeer or two" (1381) in exile, Mercury appears to Arcite in a dream and encourages him to return to Athens, where he will eventually die. As previously mentioned, this brief episode (lines 1383-1393) is original to Chaucer's reimagining of the story in *Teseida* and, at first glance, the Mercury of Chaucer seems to represent a more sinister god than the *pio* psychopomp of Boccaccio's poem, who does not appear except through the invocation of prayer when Arcita

[347] Minnis 1982, 109.

asks that Mercurio *E quinci me intra l'anime pie, / le quai sono in Eliso, mi trasporta* ("Carry [him], therefore, among the pious souls that are in Elysium" 10.95.1-2) as he dies.[348] Indeed, Wolfgang Rudat interprets the intervention as a signal that there is no moral cosmos within the text as Jupiter abdicates any responsibility for the direction of the plot.[349] However, if we consider Mercury's actions through the lens of the Mercurial figure, to think of the balance of power among the gods in this fashion is to miss the fundamental fact that it is Mercury, and not Jupiter, Saturn, Venus or any other god that is in charge of the direction of the epic plot.

In service of the plot, Mercury conjures up an end to the poem in his intervention that bridges multiple storylines and multiple timelines at once. Both Arcite and Aeneas are tortured by an ill-fated love, and both require the divine intervention of Mercury to bring their relationships, and their respective narratives, to a close. The form of that intervention comes as a dream. Like Aeneas, who sees an image *Mercurio similis* in his sleep (4.556-559), "The Knight's Tale" reads,

> Upon a night, in sleep as he hym leyde,
> Hym thoughte how that the wynged god Mercurie
> Bifron hym stood (1384-1386)

In both instances an element of ambiguity permeates the interventions since Arcite *thinks* he sees Mercury and the form that appears to Aeneas is *similar* to that of the god. Here, "hym thought…

[348] Modern English translation provided by Larry D. Benson unless otherwise noted.

[349] According to Rudat, "Jupiter is no longer the representative of a higher moral order that he had been in the *Aeneid*, because the world of the Knight's Tale, which is a cosmos only in that it is ruled by the movements of planets, is no longer a moral cosmos. The Virgilian Jupiter would be as much out of place here as the pius Aeneas - because there is no place for a recipient of pietas in a world which is mechanistic but which, since we are unable to know its predetermined course, is also a varium et mutabile. Mercury, on the other hand, is in his element here, no longer as Jupiter's messenger, but by Fortune authorized to misguide humans with his own messages. Perhaps we can say that Jupiter, who, divested of moral functions, has here no message to relate, is in the last analysis replaced, not by Saturn who seems to be disinterested in enforcing a moral order among mankind, but by Mercury." Rudat 1980, 318.

biforn hym stood" recalls how the *forma* of Mercury seems to warn Aeneas, *visa monere est* (4.557), and "in sleep" looks back to Aeneas *in somnis* (4.557). The text of "The Knight's Tale" introduces physical descriptions of Mercury that are lacking in *Teseida,* and here Mercury is distinguished by "heris brighte," which recall the *crinis flavos* ("golden hair") of *Aeneid* 4.559. The evocation of *Aeneid* 4 at this critical juncture in the text is what allows Arcite to return to Athens, despite the fact that it is against his best interest. It is Mercury's intrusion that makes Arcite a clear analogue for Aeneas and, by way of this comparison, aligns "The Knight's Tale" with the *Aeneid*, tethering its outcome to that of the most celebrated epic of Latin literature.

The image that emerges of Mercury in "The Knight's Tale" is that of corporeal entity whose physicality tethers him to the immediate terrestrial concerns of his environment and defies attempts to read the intervention as a purely allegorical presence. Though the entirety of Mercury's intervention can be contained within eleven lines, his brief visitation highlights the relationship between bodies and space:

> At Thebes, in his contree, as I seyde,
> Upon a nyght in sleep as he hym leyde,
> Hym thoughte how that the wynged god Mercurie
> Biforn hym stood and bad hym to be murie.
> His slepy yerde in hond he bar uprighte;
> An hat he werede upon his heris brighte.
> Arrayed was this god, as he took keep,
> As he was whan that Argus took his sleep;
> And seyde hym thus: 'To Atthenes shaltou wende,
> Ther is thee shapen of thy wo an ende.'
> And with that word Arcite wook and sterte.
>
> ("At Thebes, in his country, as I said,
> Upon one night as he laid himself in sleep,
> It seemed to him that the winged god Mercury
> Stood before him and commanded him to be merry.
> His sleep-inducing staff he carried upright in his hand;
> He wore a hat upon his bright hair.
> This god was dressed, as he (Arcite) noticed,
> As he was when he put Argus to sleep;

> And said to him thus: 'To Athens shalt thou go,
> Where an end of thy woe is destined for thee.'
> And with that word Arcite awoke and leaped up" 1383-1393).

The difference in content between this exchange and that of the prayer in *Teseida* 10 is striking. Here, Mercury "bad him to be murye" (1386) while ordering him to go to Athens where "ther is shapen of thy wo an ende" (1392). There is no tone of religious reverence in these lines and no apparent concern for the transmission of the soul. Rather pointedly, Mercury demonstrates concern for an earthly traversal (from Thebes to Athens) in contrast to the heavenly journey of Arcita in *Teseida*. The terrestrial concern is mirrored by the physical descriptions of the god who is "wynged," carrying a "yerde in honde" and sporting "heris brighte." Bocaccio never describes the Mercury of *Teseida* in his physical form, and when he does supply adjectives for the god, he emphasizes piety and otherworldliness, as in the case of *pio* ("merciful" 10.99.786 and 10.99.791) and *venerando* ("venerable"10.99.792). The physical intrusion of the corporeal interlocutor stands in stark contrast to the ambiguous nature of the dream, suggesting that within this space, Mercury remains on solid footing and that he is in full control. Like the Titanic intrusion of Atlas into the Apolline dream space of *Aeneid* 4, Mercury here stages the collision of Apolline and Dionysiac concerns.

Mercury's lie establishes a kingdom and bridges past/present and pagan/Christian through the imagination of a space where Arcite is both dead and free of his woe simultaneously in an interstitial time where there is no meaningful difference between the ancient past and the future. As the source of stability in the unstable dream, Mercury is able to dictate the terms of the narrative and the rules by which the story will unfold by telling a true lie that prevents the story from being overwhelmed by stasis. Whereas Mercury's message to Aeneas confirms that the epic hero is destined to establish a kingdom for the Latins, Arcite is not nearly so lucky. Although Arcite wins the "listes" (1852) for Emelye's hand in marriage, Palamon eventually weds the

maiden on account of the intercession of Venus. When Mercury arrives, we learn that Arcite "endured hadde a yeer or two" (1381) after he was released from Athens. If he had continued to remain away from Athens, he never would have encountered Palamon in the woods or ensured Emelye's marriage to his cousin. This journey back takes on greater significance when considered through the Mercurial figure's centrality to the ancient Greek epic insofar as the activation of the true lie puts "The Knight's Tale" in direct conversation with the ancient epic. The end that Mercury promises to Arcite is located in Athens at an undisclosed future time, however, it is a destination that is construed in the ancient past as the city, as the seat of classical Greek culture, evokes the origins of the English poem's genre. Unlike the *Aeneid* parallel where Mercury signals the coming death of the object of heroic love, Dido, "The Knight's Tale" inverts the allusion to signal an end to the hero's life. If Arcite does not return to Athens, there is no story to tell. For a brief moment within the dream, Arcite is the triumphant protagonist receiving his call to action from the gods themselves just as he is being prepped as a human sacrifice for the god of epic stories. The contradictory nature of his positionality mirrors the duality of the future and past time of the poem's ending. Arcite's story culminates in an impossible positionality as Mercury promises an end that is not just a physical coordinate, but a time as well.

The introduction of the dream sequence to the *Teseida* in "The Knight's Tale" synthesizes a complex web of allusions and intertexts to authorize new vectors for ancient myths, mirroring narratologically the literary practice of adapting older works. In the small and subtle addition to Boccaccio's *Teseida*, "The Knight's Tale" inherits the complex legacy of Mercurial intervention that characterizes both the *Aeneid* and *Inferno*, and stages, in miniature, the source of authority in the text. Mercury does not fit into a neat paradigm in "The Knight's Tale" because he rejects the simple pairing of god to mortal as he takes no one person's side; his investment is

in the fulfillment of the story and the evasion of narrative stasis; his presence affirms a continual rejection of simple binaries. Mercury represents both an end to woe and the culmination of it, and one outcome does not come at the expense of another. This is the nature of reception for Chaucer's text: it is challenging the idea that only two paths remain open to the writer who engages with their antecedents; according to Mercury's imposition, the author is not forced to choose between innovation or adaptation, as this is an unproductive way of treating the past. The space of "The Knight's Tale" is and is not situated in ancient and medieval time simultaneously.

The proposal for this future research project on "The Knight's Tale" represents a fraction of the material that the Mercurial figure can enrich by engaging with questions of delay, reception, deception, and authority since, between ancient and medieval time, between Italian and English literature, or between Rome and London, Mercury remains a consistent fixture of the epic mode. The study of the Mercurial figure stands to expand our understanding of how pre-modern and modern works make sense of their literary antecedents and gives us a clue as to how the transmission of epic texts translate old problems for emergent contexts. For English language studies, much remains to be done about Mercury's appearances from Christopher Marlowe's reordering of Mercury's interventions in *Dido, Queen of Carthage,* the Elizabethan stage adaptation of *Aeneid* 4, to Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey's translation of *Aeneid* 2 and 4, which represents the first publication of blank verse in English. These few examples represent a fraction of classical figures identified by name as Mercury with clear intertextual sources. When it comes to the importance of deceitful interlocutors, there is no shortage in English literature; consider, for instance, the enigmatic figure of Revenge in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* or Ariel in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in which the uncomfortable tension between the wand wielding mage and his herald speaks to a similar oscillation of power that is on display

between Vergil and Dante in the *Inferno*.

Stakes

Though the focus of my research is on the ancient Mercurial figure, the influence of the epic messenger is not isolated to the pre-modern period. In fact, the impact of the Mercurial figure and its arbitration of epic narratives is nearly impossible to quantify due to its ubiquity across forms, contexts, and eras. Speedsters, tricksters, escorts, and interlocutors are staples of the hero's journey even in contemporary media, from Star Trek's Q to Marvel's Loki. The line between the archaic Hermes and these pop culture references is not straight, however, and much remains to be done to demonstrate how classical reception has shaped the contemporary media landscape and its super heroic narratives. Throughout my childhood in South Florida and well into my studies for my Classics degree at the University of Florida, I was preoccupied with these characters and their clear inheritance from antiquity. Even now, when I introduce my students to epic literature, I take up these pop culture symbols to demonstrate the enduring mobility of the genre that remains relevant to my students' interest today.

The contemporary stakes of this dissertation speak to an urgent political problem that touches not only my scholarly investment in the Classics, but the public education in Florida that shaped me into the classicist that I am. Given that my argument puts alterity at the center of the epic genre, the relationship of classical epic to the conservative project to transform public education in my native Florida is deeply troubling.[350] In 2023, Conservative activists appointed

[350] For an overview of recent work on the intersection of American far-right politics and antiquity, see Donna Zuckerberg's *Not all Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age* (Harvard University Press 2019) as well as Heidi Morse's Online Exhibit, "Classics and the Alt-Right: Historicizing Visual Rhetorics of White Supremacy," (LearnSpeakAct: A LSA Blog, University of Michigan, 2019).

by Florida governor Ron DeSantis staged a hostile takeover of New College of Florida, and in their transformation of the college into a bastion for conservative professors, they have upheld the *Odyssey* as the origin of an exceptional Western canon. In their attempt to erase a number of disciplines from the college's curriculum, the trustees only offer one course that meets the college's humanities credit requirement in 2024, a class called "The Odyssey," which focuses on Homeric poetry exclusively.[351] In their recent update to the college's mission statement, the trustees write that "great achievement" is only possible through the connection of "the Western canon to the challenges of the information age."[352] The obvious implication that the *Odyssey* constitutes the beginning of a great Western canon that somehow binds the American conservative project to ancient Greece is nonsensical and dangerous. Attempts such as these are misguided because the Greco-Roman epic, in my reevaluation of Hermes/Mercury, defies any attempt to situate power in a single source and relies upon the fragmentation of power in its imagination of history.

Partisan threats to higher education put a classicist such as myself in an awkward situation of wanting to champion the study of antiquity, but not at the expense of other disciplines, and certainly not at the behest of an imperialist and racist project to transform the ancient Mediterranean into one of the birthplaces of American exceptionalism.[353] Through the

[351] "Classes including Introduction to Sociology, Introduction to Cultural Anthropology, Religion in America, a Latin American film studies class and a section on feminist writings from Africa will seemingly no longer count toward general education credits. In some cases, students have no choice at all; to fulfill NCF's humanities requirement, the only option is now a half-semester course on *The Odyssey*. (When NCF introduced the class last fall to beta test it for inclusion in the core curriculum, the rollout was so abrupt that officials struggled to find guest lecturers to teach it.)" Josh Moody, "A Clash Over Core Curriculum at New College of Florida," *Inside Higher Ed*, October 29, 2024,

[352] From the mission statement of New College of Florida, https://www.ncf.edu/about/mission-values/.

[353] In his article in response to Allan Bloom's conservative defense of the Classics, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Karl Galinsky ponders, "Do we want to pull the rug from under ourselves by

Mercurial figure, I have aimed to not put classical epic on a pedestal, but to evidence, in its composition and reception, that alterity and transgression govern the epic mode; any attempt to use classical epic to support traditionalist revisions of history are missing this crucial point. classicists, critics, and comparativists can recuperate the epic by disentangling the source of its authority and by demonstrating how the trespassing interlocutor and the liar who usurps the direction of the epic narrative rejects any single reading of history and that alterity itself is the governing principle of the epic form that is, itself, queer.

The Mercurial figure offers an essential opportunity to interrogate the nearly ineffable power of speech in the 21st century classroom, as politicians and advocacy groups argue about the role of the ancient canon and the epic's place of privilege within it. At the core of my dissertation are a few underlying questions that speak to this issue: Who gets to tell the epic story? To whom does the epic form belong? What do we stand to lose about its nuance if we surrender the epic poem to revisionist historical projects? As we have seen throughout the dissertation, I have argued at great length that the Mercurial figure's arbitration of the *nusquam* prevents any single authority or reading to be imposed on the body of the poem from any one Apolline source and that alternative readings are not only possible, but they are also essential to understanding the genre's delicate balance of closure and catastrophe.

Within the void of the epic *nusquam*, the idea of the nation or the idea of an unbroken

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agreeing that the importance of Greco-Roman culture should be diminished? Are we then prepared to relinquish some of our faculty positions to African-American studies and the like? The perceived dilemma, inflicted by the usual limiting dichotomies, seems to be that as a proponent of western civilization, one is *nolens volens* allied with [William]Bennett and [Allan] Bloom, an impression any politically correct humanities professor wants to avoid, of course." Karl Galinsky, "Classics beyond Crisis," *The Classical World* 84, no. 6 (1991): 448. For a meditation on the same problem from 2016, see Eric Adler, "Allan Bloom on the Value of the Ancients, or The Closing of the American Classics Department," *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 24, no. 1 (2016): 151–60. In both accounts, neither author provides a clear path forward.

historical or cultural inheritance is another fiction. The Mercurial force that gives these stories a shape is necessarily improvisational and arises out of a constant rejection of binaries. One of the central tensions of the written epic is that it attempts to record the oscillations of meaning and power at a specific moment in a given mythological or historical context, which, Mercury reminds us, is impossible. In the quantum field of the epic narrative, Mercury is the key to making sense of how the outsider or observer makes their own meaning moment to moment, free of the imposition of the gods, history, or convention. The Mercurial figure affirms again and again in its reception that the periphery is and has always been the center of the arts, and to deemphasize the study of epic because of how it has been misused by traditional institutions allows those appropriators to erase alterity from the story of the epic form.

Ultimately, if authority in the epic narrative does not belong to a single Apolline source, but is fragmented and governed by Hermes/Mercury, then its relationship to racist and traditionalist inclinations to enshrine the Greco-Roman epic as a pillar of a Western canon needs to change. While critiques of the Humanities by organizations such as #DisruptTexts have led to productive conversations about how to expand canonical literature and how to be more inclusive and less androcentric or Eurocentric, we should keep the Mercurial figure's inclination to laugh in the face of power in mind in our reevaluation of epic poetry.[354] If power comes from nowhere in the epic project, our ability to redirect or reshape it may derive from our ability to bend its rules in the void of interstitial spaces.

[354] Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán, Kimberly N. Parker, and Julia Torres, "#DisruptTexts: An Introduction," (*The English Journal* 110, no. 1 2020): 100–102.

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