

## THE GOD HERMES

ALLAN (A.) *Hermes*. Pp. xviii + 214, ills, map. London and New York: Routledge, 2018. Cased, £115. ISBN: 978-1-138-80570-5.

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A.'s *Hermes* belongs to a distinguished series entitled *Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World*. The purpose of the book, and of the series, is to offer biographies of each god or hero with investigations into the specific deities' characteristics and their cultural contexts. Each book in the series is divided into three sections: the introduction, which outlines the aspects and characteristics of the deity in the Classical world; the second section, which includes the major themes associated with the deity or hero; and the final section, which explores the deity as he or she is represented in cultures after the Classical period. As the interest in heroic figures has increased in popularity in our culture, the series and the book speak to a modern audience.

According to A., a rationale for the study of Hermes begins with an affirmation of his importance as a cult figure with 'highly localized titles' and surnames that identify his role in Greek religion and culture. The reader should be familiar with the Fourth *Homeric Hymn* as A. references it frequently in the introduction and throughout. The book would be most useful for researchers, graduate students, and as a reference book for undergraduates. The text assumes a basic knowledge of the subject matter; as a reference source, it is comprehensive, detailed and definitive. As A.'s study progresses, the reader must also be aware of Greek drama, poetry and the social context of Hermes in the ancient world. Even if one has a basic knowledge of Hermes, A. complements that knowledge with detailed accuracy.

The book is divided into seven 'Key Themes' of Hermes' character. The first is an overview of his basic characteristics found in the *Hymn*. A. asserts that Hermes, 'as the power behind purposeful individual and systematic movement', possesses cunning or *mêtis*, stealth, creativity, wit and propriety. What is interesting about this chapter is A.'s ability to place Hermes' characteristics in the context of his place and purpose in the cosmos in relation to Zeus and the other gods and goddesses of the Pantheon. What Hermes inherits allows him to access certain situations and intuitively know how to carry out his tasks; therefore, his purpose becomes clear and the context of his creation also becomes clear. In A.'s words, 'Hermes is found acting in the offices granted him by Zeus' (p. 36).

The second chapter, 'Transmissions', logically follows the above assumption considering Hermes' role as Divine Messenger or Zeus's Herald. A. describes Hermes' role as a 'leader of dreams', as an interpreter of signs or translator of messages, as a teacher of young men in Greek society and as an orator. Hermes' role in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and in Plato's *Cratylus* add dimension to A.'s description of Hermes' purpose as 'transmitter' of the Greek Pantheon. The third chapter follows a similar theme outlining Hermes' role in several myths that depict him as a Divine Guide and a protector of places and property as he moves from one place to another or from one cosmic sphere to another. Again, A.'s attention to detail and compilation of facts is impressive.

In the next two chapters, 'Transactions' and 'Transpositions', A. explores the nature of Hermes' character as he moves through the cosmos. His sense for reciprocity, 'convivial and satisfying interactions', friendship and hospitality define his nature as both balanced and giving in both personal and commercial endeavours. Despite his reputation as a thief or trickster and his methods of deception, Hermes as shapeshifter may still be thought of as creative and inspiring. In an interesting assumption, A. clarifies how Hermes is different from most trickster figures. She asserts that despite his ability to facilitate change and innovation through his actions, Hermes 'will not remain a continual transgressor against the powers that be' (p. 101). In other words, he will always be at the command of Zeus.

In order for Hermes to achieve the ‘Transcendence’ that he was destined to achieve in Zeus’s cosmos, A. states that ‘it is the connections he facilitates among the other gods that convert Zeus’ static order into the dynamic one in which he plays a crucial role’ (p. 105). This is done through the distribution of honours in the Olympian family, through loyalty to his father, through the protection of mortals and through a positive resolution of conflict in war. A. does not let us forget that in all these endeavours, Hermes offers music and laughter, ‘making play possible and thus lightening the load of mortals following the mortal/divine breach occasioned by Prometheus’ ill-conceived attempt to out-smart Zeus’ (p. 119). By referencing the myth of Prometheus, A. solidifies the purpose of Hermes’ creation and his importance in Greek mythology.

In the final chapter on the ‘Key Themes’ of Hermes’ character and in the last two chapters of the book, A. moves to viewing Hermes outside of the Greek Pantheon, establishing his importance in the history, literature and mythology of other cultures. Hermes’ role in Etruscan, Roman, Mesopotamian/Babylonian and Egyptian culture is reviewed with the same attention to detail and accuracy that characterises the entire work. A. states that what seems to emerge from the overview of cultures is that cultures to the east were receptive to Hermes’ communication techniques whereas cultures to the west ‘valued Mercury’s mercantile activities’. Her final comments on Hermes fulfil the objective of the series, which is to view the deity in the modern world. Here, A. devotes two chapters, ‘Transformations I’ and ‘Transformations II’, to Hermes.

A.’s synopsis includes Hermes’ depictions in art, astrology, magic and alchemy where he ‘no longer existed as a god’ (p. 161). According to A., Hermes is a poetic device, a metal or a planet that represents attributes of humanity from the 1400s and the Renaissance to the late 1800s. Final transformations in ‘high and popular culture’ include A.’s analysis of Hermes in DC and Marvel Comics, Disney Studios, stage and screen and in the poetry and prose of modern and contemporary times. A. concludes the book with an analysis of Hermes as he is appropriated in philosophy, psychology, etymology, advertising and mass communication. Faced with a seemingly daunting task, A. has managed to give the reader an accurate and stimulating view of our current beliefs in terms of one symbolic figure in our imaginations.

A. closes the text with suggestions for further reading and an extensive bibliography that is most helpful for both scholars of Classical Studies and students of mythology at undergraduate and graduate levels. A.’s volume is highly recommended as a library reference book, a graduate text and a helpful addition to any scholar’s library. Viewed by itself, the book is valuable; however, the book is of utmost importance for the contribution it makes to the series *Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World*.

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## THE DIVINE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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This collection is a product of the research project ‘Power Structuralism in Ancient Ontologies’ directed by Marmodoro at Oxford University (2011–2016) and is in that