

Awakening the Trickster

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In mythology, whenever a system becomes overregulated, a figure spontaneously appears to restore balance by introducing chaos. The trickster is “playful, mischievous, and sometimes outrageous.” He delights in paradox, confusion, and “auspicious bewilderment” (Anderson, 1998 p. 84). He keeps us from being too confident that we know what we are doing or that we are in control. Almost all mythologies in the world have trickster characters (Radin, 1956), but the one most closely associated with research is the Greek god Hermes. This paper is a hermeneutic exploration of the story of Hermes and the qualities of the trickster archetype in the hope of awakening ideas for resisting attempts to curtail scholarly freedom and bringing more joy to our inquiry.

The world that Hermes was born into, as recounted by Robert Graves (1996), was much like the one described in the conference brochure. The government of Mount Olympus was run with a heavy hand by Zeus. However, the day-to-day operations, including the regulation of research, were managed by his son Apollo, who disapproved all projects not strictly based on “cognitive modes of experience” (Nietzsche, 1956, p. 22).

Hermes was also a son of Zeus. Unlike his rich and powerful half-brother Apollo, he was born in a cave with neither possessions nor job prospects. He did have one advantage, however; he was a trickster. The Homeric hymn (Sargent, 1973) relates that when he was only one day old, he slipped away from his mother and went looking for adventure. He came upon a tortoise and used its shell to invent the lyre. And later he invented a method for creating fire by twirling a stick. The trickster is a shapeshifter, which to Lewis Hyde (1998) means that he can transform whatever materials come to hand to create his own world. The trickster is a

deconstructor as well as a creator of worlds. Like Penelope, she can unravel by night the reality that she weaves during the day.

The first use that Hermes made of his lyre was to lull his mother to sleep so he could sneak off again, this time to steal Apollo's cattle. The trickster never accepts reality as a given, especially the reality of how the world is divided up, but breaks the rules to shift it to his own advantage. Hermes is the god of thieves and, in stories around the world, tricksters steal from the gods what humans need to survive or what is inequitable distributed – fire, light, water, and especially knowledge. On a more mundane level there is Robin Hood who steals as a way of creating an alternative social reality.

When Hermes stole the cattle, to confuse pursuers, he made them walk backwards. He also made himself a pair of sandals with no heel or toe so his tracks could not be followed. In spite of his deceptions, Apollo discovered the identity of the cattle thief and confronted Hermes. His response was to lie so extravagantly that Apollo's anger was disarmed. He went on to play his lyre so charmingly that Apollo was completely enchanted, so much so that he made Hermes Keeper of the Herds, thus changing the lie into a truth. The trickster is a master of deception. Like Portia, Rosalind and other tricky Shakespearean heroines, she uses disguises, masks, and cunning stratagems to evade the control of oppressive individuals or cultural institutions. The trickster's lying is a refusal to take the world as it is. Instead she creates her own imaginary world. The trickster is a charmer and an enchanter. Hermes' music like the stories of Scheherazade (Jurich, 1998), have the power to transform reality.

Apollo was not the only god who was enchanted by Hermes. His father, Zeus, offered him the job of being messenger of the gods when he discovered how ingenious and skillful with language Hermes was and gave him his most familiar symbol, the winged sandals that make it possible for him to travel as swiftly as the wind or, indeed, as swiftly as the speed of thought. Donald Polkinghorne has emphasized this role of Hermes as the messenger god. "He not only bridged the spatial distance between gods and humans but also translated for humans the meaning and intention of the messages he brought" (1983, p. 218). Although in this capacity as messenger, Hermes promised that he would never lie, he would not agree to always tell the whole truth. Hermes' tracks are easy to see, but their meaning is difficult to decipher. Unlike some of the philosophers who have claimed to be his followers, Hermes is not interested in finding the one true meaning but rather in multiplying the possibilities of meaning (Hyde).

Hermes is the god of the crossroads, the messenger between worlds and the guide who conducts souls to the Underworld. His nature is inimical to all boundaries and occupies both sides of polarities (Kerényi, 1956). He plays tricks but provokes insight and one of the aspects of research is being open to the trickster and staying with the bewilderment and confusion generated by inquiry. One of the responsibilities of Hermes is to maintain the freedom of the roads for travelers anywhere in the world. Scholars, who travel in the mind, are therefore under his protection. The trickster crosses the line, breaks the rules, and undermines duality. He is polytropic, "turning many ways" (Hyde, p. 52). He is never content to situate himself within the boundaries of territories that have been staked out by academics or professional practitioners. The trickster confounds a perspective that sees reality

only through the lens of power. He proves that something exists that is neither power nor its opposite. Hermes also invented the idea of exchange, bargaining the lyre that he made from the tortoise shell with Apollo for the knowledge of prophecy. Making deals is another way that the trickster creates his own world and disrupts established patterns.

The trickster represents an experience of reality that transcends politics, culture, ethics, and fate (Kerényi, 1956) and his trickery is often the only way of escape when these have trapped us in a double bind (McNeely, 1996). Characters such as Hermes, Loki, and Coyote, in trickster stories around the world, revel in “gleeful insubordination” (McNeely, 1996, p. 87). They have always been closely associated with carnival and other rituals that turn reality upside down (Jung, 1956). The trickster regards inquiry as a glorious adventure. His trickery and transgressions bring him not anxiety but delight and freedom.

We can share in that joy and freedom by imagining our own trickster energy or by connecting with one of his personifications. In Greek mythology, as well as Hermes, there is the tricky Odysseus. The Norse have Loki, who causes earthquakes. Africa has Eshu who gave humans the knowledge of divination. It was the Monkey King, the traditional Chinese trickster character, that inspired the hero in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey* (1990). In America, Coyote is a well-known trickster. However, in the Northwest, it is Raven who steals daylight for humans. In the South, Brer Rabbit thrives in the briar patch. In Hawaii, there is Maui, who snared the sun.

Most of the time, the trickster is represented as a male figure such as Hermes or as an animal such as Coyote or Raven. However, a woman can also play the

part of the trickster as Penelope does with her unweaving. In stories of women tricksters, the archetype is usually a role that is taken on to evade the control, threats, or ineptness of their men or their culture rather than intrinsic to their nature, as in Grimm's tale of "Clever Gretel" (1987) or the tale of the cunning wife in "The Butcher's Tale" (Burton, 1997) or the story of the teller of this tale, Scheherazade. Nowhere are the women trickier than in Shakespeare's comedies such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Although Lewis Hyde points out that it is difficult for the trickster to thrive in a monotheistic world, he can still be found in contemporary mythology. As well as inspiring Maxine Hong Kingston's book, he is the hero of Umberto Eco's *Baudolino* (2003) and appears as Peeves in the Harry Potter books. As Q, he was a recurring character in *Star Trek*. He can be seen in such films as *M*A*S*H*, *Around The World in 80 Days*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

All these characters share some or all of the trickster characteristics. They cross boundaries and break the rules. They change the way that things are distributed. They create a world that is more lively and colorful and they have the cleverness and charm to get away with their trickery. Although a little bit of the trickster goes a long way, by awakening his energy in our own consciousness and inviting him to participate in our research, a touch of the trickster gives us a way of loosening the grip of control-oriented research paradigms and bringing more vitality and delight to our research.

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