

## Wandering Wombs and Wandering Islands in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*

In the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, a pregnant Leto wanders over the earth in protracted labor as Hera's punishment for mating with Zeus. It is not until the rocky, floating island of Delos agrees to receive her that she is able to give birth clasping a palm tree—an event which stabilizes the island and causes it to burst into bloom. While much scholarly attention has focused on the hymn's performative and cultural context (e.g. Bakker 2002, Martin 2000, Nagy 1994, Clay 1994 and 1989), the unity of its two halves (e.g. Miller 1986, Clay 1989), and its representation of Apollo (e.g. Lord 1994, Miller 1986, Solomon 1994, Birge 1994), no study has yet examined Leto's birth experience and its relevance both to the stability and sudden fertility of Delos and the tableau of divine familial stability with which the hymn opens as Apollo strides onto Olympus under the proud gaze of his parents.

This paper argues first that Delos' terrestrial motility mirrors Leto's similarly unstable position within the Olympian social structure—conditions that are remedied by the birth of Apollo. Next, I argue that Leto and Delos' mobility is linked to folk beliefs about the wandering womb. In medical writing, sex and birth are identified as remedies for this potentially dangerous condition: sexual intercourse was thought to straighten the mouth of the womb, irrigate it with semen, and anchor it in place with a growing baby, the birth of which would widen a woman's passageways and allow fluids to circulate more freely (King 1998). The biological transformation of a woman into a mother is concomitant with her social transformation as a central member of the household (King 1998). Similarly, the biological event of Leto's delivery of Apollo, clasping a (phallic) palm tree, transforms the pitiable Leto into the proud mother of Apollo, son of Zeus, and bestows upon the rocky, barren, marginalized island of Delos the elevated status of a cult center of one of the most important gods in the Olympic pantheon.

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