Zeus saw the nymph walking the Cyllene hills in the midst of sheep: Maia, daughter of Atlas. Clad in purple, she rose above the flock like an iris on a silvery stalk in a field of milkweed bolls. He wanted her as his wife. Which one would this be? He’d lost count. A cheery observation—the world teemed with lovely lasses.

His arms itched to hold her. But Hera, his queen, would surely learn of it. That would be unpleasant; Hera had become a royal nag.

So Zeus waited till evening and tucked Hera into bed, then snuck across the fragrant meadow and into the deep cave where Maia dwelled. The goddess turned her head in shyness so her thick curls covered her face. Zeus laughed loud; he could never resist the charms of sweet youth.

At dawn on the fourth day of the ninth month later, a perfect son leaped from Maia’s womb into her arms. She named him Hermes and set him in a cradle deep within her cave home. But the tiny boy hopped out and ran for the mouth of the cave.

Hermes laughed in glee, the same way his father laughed the night he visited Maia. There in his path was a spangle-shelled tortoise. The boy killed it, then filled the emptied high-domed shell with cut reeds. He stretched ox hide over it, then used sheep horns to make a crosspiece and stretched seven gut strings upon them. Behold, this babe had just
invented the first lyre. He strummed and sang to Maia; they spent the afternoon telling stories of the gods.

When Maia finally put Hermes into his cradle again and lounged upon her own bed, he waited for her to fall asleep—just as his father Zeus had waited for Hera to fall asleep the night he visited Maia. Then the babe crept from the cave. He followed the path of the waning sun to the shadowy mountains of Pieria, where he saw a herd of cattle, large and low-bellowing. These were Apollo’s, the boy somehow knew. It pleased him to rob from such a stuck-up god.

He led away fifty cattle, magically reversing their hoofprints so one would think they’d traveled the other direction. In a wooded spot, Hermes rubbed sticks together and invented fire and set a tree ablaze. He slew two long-horned cows and roasted them and offered their meat to the gods. Then he went stealthily into his mother’s cave, moving like an autumn breeze. He climbed into his cradle and wrapped the swaddling cloth about his shoulders. But Maia awoke and sensed the trick immediately. She called him

**TRICKSTER Tales**

Crafty Hermes plays naught baby tricks. Lots of mythological tricksters have babyish or animal ways. The British story of Peter Pan is about a boy who never grows up and plays all day. Many Native American stories tell of Coyote, a magical figure who gets involved in funny stories, but also often death stories. These tricksters do what they want, without thinking about the effects on others. We laugh, but we also see what a mess life would be if we all did that.
a knave. Hermes grinned. He vowed to steal whatever he wanted whenever he wanted.

When an older farmer told Apollo who had plundered his cattle, the god stomped to the sweet-smelling cave. In the cradle, Hermes pretended to be asleep. But Apollo demanded to know where the cattle were.

Hermes, all innocence, asked, “How could a newborn with feet soft as melted butter steal the cattle of the great Apollo? Imagine the public shame if it were true. But it’s not.”

Apollo stared, then burst out in laughter. “Crafty little liar. Lead me to my cattle.”

“I swear I stole nothing!”

In a rage, Apollo picked up Hermes, who, as a baby will do, let out a trumpet blast from his bottom. Surprised, Apollo dropped him. But then he tucked him under an arm and carried him up Mount Olympus to demand a judgment from Zeus, the king of gods. Hermes still denied all. But Zeus saw through the deceit and told them, both his sons, to join forces and bring the cattle home.

Furious, Apollo tied Hermes up so he could steal no more. But the invincible babe broke through the ropes. Still, the timbre of Apollo’s voice and the flash of his eyes finally convinced Hermes the problem wouldn’t disappear on its own. Besides, Apollo was awesome in his anger, and Hermes wanted all the gods, but especially Apollo, to love
him. He took out his turtle-shell lyre and played so enchantingly flowers bent toward him. Then he gave the melody-dazed Apollo the lyre as a peace offering. Apollo played it so much better than Hermes that even rocks tumbled from precipices and rolled closer to the music.

The two half brothers vowed loyalty to one another, and Apollo gave Hermes three winged maidens—the Thriae, who could foretell the future—as a token of his friendship. In approval Zeus declared Hermes lord over birds of omen, as well as dogs, sheep, grim-eyed lions, and gleaming-tusked boars. And he appointed him messenger to Hades; Hephaestus forged him a helmet to make him invisible, like that of Hades, and sandals with wings, to help in his travels. But everyone still admitted the new god was a rogue.

A rogue. Spicy label. And it felt affectionate. The rogue smiled.