

## Corinna: “Thinking Like a Mountain”

Corinna PMG 654 1 col. i tells the story of a singing contest, and the victorious song treats the story of Zeus, Kronos, and Rhea, characters prominent also in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. But so long as we follow Page’s (1962: 326-7) text, Corinna’s poem departs from Hesiodic tradition in its exploration of the emotional experiences and expressions of nonhuman beings.

Several responses to the poem have focused on its relationship to male-authored poetry and on its handling of human or humanlike characters. Bowman (2004) argues that in PMG 654 1 col. i and elsewhere Corinna adheres to the gender norms of myth familiar from the works of male poets. According to Rayor, however, the poem recasts the male-centered narrative of Zeus’s victory over Cronus, familiar from Hesiod, by focusing on the contribution of Rhea; Corinna thus produces a poem appropriate “for an audience of women” (1993: 219). Vergados (2012) points to other departures from Hesiod: the poem awards victory to Cithaeron rather than to Helicon, haunt of the Hesiodic Muses, and relegates those goddesses to supervisors of the vote that decides the contest.

Such comments, however, miss important aspects of Corinna’s innovations in her representation of the natural world. Ebert’s (1978) supplementation of the text allows him to identify Helicon and Cithaeron as human characters who would have been transformed into mountains in lines now lost. But as the poem is “usually understood” (Heath 2017: 99), it “describ[es] a singing-match between the Boeotian mountains Helicon and Cithaeron” (Campbell 1982: 411). Page’s text (1962: 326-7), which is the source of such readings, treats the surviving evidence more cautiously than Ebert’s. In lines 29-34, the focus of Ebert’s attention, Page opts only to supply a pronominal object, *nin*, for the verb *eirese* (“pushed it,” 33-4), which

would refer back to the “smooth rock” mentioned in line 31. This gives us a poem in which Mount Cithaeron concludes his song and is awarded victory by the gods, who adorn him with garlands (1-28); for this reason, “his mind rejoiced” (28). In turn, the defeated mountain, Helicon, suffers “grievous pains” (29), reacts “pitifully” (33), and then pushes the “smooth rock” down, along with “countless stones” (33-4). On such readings, the mountains experience humanlike emotions (joy, grief) as a result of their contrasting fortunes. Neither, however, possess humanlike bodies: Cithaeron sings (*emelpsem*, 18) but, in what survives of the poem, is not even said to have a mouth. Helicon, moreover, expresses his emotions in a manner suitable for his rocky body: he causes a landslide.

Corinna’s poem, therefore, counteracts not only the privileging of male characters but also another tendency of canonical, male-authored poetry – towards anthropocentrism, in terms of the centering of human or humanlike characters. Herodotus (2.53) praises Homer and Hesiod for describing the humanlike forms, families, and political structures of the gods. And indeed the Homeric and Hesiodic poems tend to depict either humanlike gods with humanlike motivations or inanimate natural surroundings. The Hesiodic Helicon, for instance, is merely the backdrop for the dances of the anthropomorphic Muses. On the reading proposed here, Corinna’s poem departs from such tendencies. As in Aldo Leopold’s essay “Thinking Like a Mountain” (1968: 129-133), Corinna’s depiction of mountains suggests a mode of being that only partially maps onto human experiences. She portrays an animate environment, not by anthropomorphizing natural phenomena but by attributing volition and voice to elements of the natural world.

## Bibliography

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