

The Power of a Persona: Stifling Speech in Archaic Epic

This paper takes as its starting point the noticeable discrepancy between the works of Homer and Hesiod in terms of direct speech by the characters. Homer's penchant for allowing his characters to tell their own story, as it were, has long been recognized; approximately 45% of the *Iliad* and 67% of the *Odyssey* are composed as direct speech, as compared with 3.3% of the *Theogony* and 1.4% of the *Works and Days* (Griffin 1986, 37). While the sample from Hesiod is much smaller, the difference is still vast enough to be significant, especially considering that the Homeric Hymns – poems composed in the epic tradition, but not by the same author(s) as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* – also tend very much toward the Homeric model. I suggest that a possible explanation for this particular difference between our two main sources of archaic hexameter is to be found in a performative aspect of ancient epic. Here a distinction must be drawn between the individual bard, who sings Homeric or Hesiodic poetry on a specific occasion, and the poet, an abstraction constructed by the poetry itself. Insofar as the text provides a clear persona for the poet, the bard must in effect don a mask representing that persona. If the persona is especially colorful or intimate, it may be difficult for the bard to assume additional, potentially incongruous masks as he speaks in the person of one character after another. This is the experience of the Hesiodic bard, who initially assumes the guise of the Boeotian shepherd-poet and is thereafter reluctant to do the same with his divine or monstrous characters; indeed, any attempt to do this risks being comical. The Homeric bard, on the other hand, need not address this difficulty, for no such colorful persona is to be found in the Homeric epics; when the bard sings anonymously – facelessly, even – he is left free to assume a variety of masks at different times (Nagy 1996, esp. 60-2, 80-6, 214-24).

Concrete support for this argument may be gained through the techniques of narratological analysis as championed most notably by Irene de Jong. The Homeric epics are remarkably consistent in distinguishing between narrator-text and character-text (i.e. direct speech). The latter is often marked by the use of “evaluative” words (e.g. “shameful,” “wretched”) that involve a judgment call on the part of the speaker; the narrator typically avoids such judgment calls, and exceptions are almost all instances of embedded focalization, in which the poet imagines events through the eyes of a character but gives no assessment of his own. “Homer” thus remains obscure and incidental to his story. “Hesiod” is quite another matter, for no clear distinction is observed between his narrator- and character-text: evaluative words are used indiscriminately by poet and characters alike, and where the work of narration itself receives attention (e.g. in aetiologies or citations), it recalls the initial poetic persona – something not possible in the Homeric tradition, where the persona is absent (Nünlist 2004; Stoddard 2004). These tendencies suggest that the lack of direct speech in Hesiodic poetry is due to the fact that the poem itself is already conceived of as direct speech: that of the poet (cf. Kelly 2008).

Selected Bibliography

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