

## The Quarrel with Perses and Hesiod's Biography

This paper explores a blatant contradiction in the Hesiodic biographical tradition that has not been addressed in previous scholarship. As Lefkowitz (2012<sup>2</sup>), Graziosi (2002), Kivilo (2010), and others have amply demonstrated, the ancient biographical tradition mines the works of poets for information regarding their lives. Hesiod is no exception: his encounter with the Muses on Helicon (*Th.* 21-34), his victory in the poetic competition in Chalkis (*WD* 650-62), as well as references to his father and brother in the *WD* have been appropriated and embedded in narrative accounts of the poet's life, often with considerable elaboration. Given how carefully and consistently Hesiodic poetry is read as a source of biographical material, therefore, it is particularly striking that extant biographical accounts completely ignore Hesiod's dispute with his brother Perses, an incident that is explicitly established in the *WD* as the poem's occasion and dramatic setting (esp. *WD* 27-41). This glaring omission may be due to the poem's vagueness regarding the exact details of the brothers' dispute or to the lack of information about its ultimate outcome. The biographical tradition, however, has done more with less. In this paper, I suggest that Hesiod's conflict with Perses was pushed to the margins of his biographical narratives for two complementary reasons. First, there is evidence that some ancient readers of the *WD* doubted the historicity of the brothers' quarrel; moreover, the poetic *agon* in Chalkis and Hesiod's victory against Homer eventually became the predominant incident of *eris* in the poet's life and replaced the quarrel with Perses as the context for composition and performance of poetry about ethical and agricultural matters.

In the scholia to *WD* (*Proleg.* B and sch. 27a Pertusi) we learn that some interpreters of the poem considered the possibility that Perses' representation was not historically accurate but fictional; in other words, they read the poem's 'Perses' as a *persona* created to advance the

poet's didactic message. Since it redefines the quarrel as a fictional frame for the whole poem, this nuanced interpretation represents a strand of Hesiodic scholarship that would exclude the brothers' quarrel from any account of the poet's life. While doubt was cast upon the historicity of the dispute over property, however, Hesiod's account of his victory at the poetic competition in Chalkis (*WD* 650-62) was not only received as a historical event but was also adapted to support the relative dating of Homer and Hesiod as contemporaries. The biographical tradition cultivated within the rhapsodic circles supplied Homer as Hesiod's opponent, and a detailed narrative of their contest (known primarily from the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE *Certamen*) was fully developed by the 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, or perhaps even earlier (e.g., Richardson 1981, Graziosi 2002). In addition to reinforcing the idea that the two poets lived at the same time, the story of their *agon* offers a subtle commentary on their poetics and creates an alternative occasion for the performance of Hesiodic poetry that involves a more famous, interesting, and challenging opponent than silent Perses. In fact, the *Certamen* appears to consciously revise the dramatic setting of *WD* in several respects: political authority is now on Hesiod's side and, despite the crowd's preference for Homer, the *Works and Days* is doubtlessly appreciated for its message. Furthermore, while in the *WD* the dispute is never resolved and the poem's impact upon the delinquent brother remains undetermined, the *Certamen* brings the *agon* to a closure by granting victory to Hesiod and his didactic poem. Finally, and perhaps more importantly for this argument, the *Certamen* allows Hesiod to perform his poetry in a setting which, according to the *WD*, exemplifies precisely the type of strife (*eris*) he approves of; it is, therefore, the exact opposite of the dispute over property in *WD*, which involves strife that the poet clearly rejects (*WD* 11-26; on the poetic competition, see esp. *WD* 26).

In sum, this paper attempts to explain why Hesiod's biographical narratives ignore his dispute with Perses even though their quarrel is the dramatic setting for the *Works and Days*. I suggest that this omission may be linked to a reading of the quarrel as fictional, which is attested in the scholia to *WD*. Furthermore, I argue that the popular story of the contest between Homer and Hesiod offered a more intricate and interesting confrontation that eventually eclipsed the dispute with Perses in Hesiod's biographical accounts.

#### Works Cited

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