

Revisiting the Hesiodic Catalogue in the *Prometheus Bound*

This paper explores a neglected aspect of Hesiodic reception in the *Prometheus Bound* (*PV*). While the engagement of the *PV* with Hesiodic poetry has received ample attention (e.g. Wilamowitz, 1914; Solmsen, 1949; Conacher, 1980; Griffith, 1983; Saïd, 1985), the discussion has focused almost exclusively on the play's reception of the *Theogony*. There is no doubt that the tragedy's representation of the divine realm is a critical reflection upon Hesiod's theogonic narrative. The aim of this paper, however, is to demonstrate the play's interest in a different part of the Hesiodic corpus, namely genealogic poetry. Through a close reading of the Io-scene (*PV* 742-886) and the immediately following *stasimon* (*PV* 887-907), I argue that the play's female characters offer a subversive commentary on the *Catalogue of Women*, the poem which celebrated the sexual unions between gods and mortal women and the progeny that resulted from them (Hes. fr. 1 MW).

Io's scene is the longest and arguably the most pathetic in the entire *PV*. It exposes Zeus' unfair and predatory manipulation of humankind, thus complementing Prometheus' earlier criticisms of his leadership. Insofar as she suffers unjustly because of Zeus, Io can be viewed as a mortal counterpart of Prometheus. As a victim of Zeus' erotic desire, however, Io is also one of the women commemorated in the Hesiodic *Catalogue* (frs. 124-126 MW). Divine attention has cost Io not only her family and city, but also her control over her body and mind. By dramatizing her plight, the *PV* undermines the celebratory frame through which Hesiodic genealogical poetry presents such unions. It is important to note that Io problematizes the Hesiodic perspective not only as a pitiful spectacle but also as a narrator of her own experiences (*PV* 645-83). The play represents Io as only partially transformed into a cow, thus allowing her to have a voice and to communicate her thoughts and feelings in the first person. In the *Catalogue*, by contrast, Io

undergoes a full metamorphosis into a cow (fr. 124 MW), and, more importantly, none of the women featured in the entire poem speaks (Tsagalis, 2009). By allowing Io to express her grief and tell her own story, therefore, the *PV* breaks the silence that defines the women of the *Catalogue* and carves space for the female perspective.

Immediately after Io's frenzied departure, the Oceanids of the chorus sing an ode that undermines even further the positive frame through which Hesiodic poetry views divine erotic desire. As inferior divinities, the Oceanids are not only sympathetic towards Io (*PV* 989-900, cf. 687-95) but also horrified at the prospect of attracting an Olympian's erotic attention (894-97, 901-907). Unlike marriages among equals (*PV* 887-93 and 901-02), unions with the almighty Olympians are perceived as aggressive, dangerous, and undesirable. Notice that the Oceanids conclude their explicit commentary on the perils of Zeus' bed with a reference to his μητις (*PV* 907), thus subtly evoking Zeus' first divine consort and victim (Hes. *Th.* 886-900), who was manipulated and ultimately completely consumed by the cosmic ruler.

In sum, the *PV* views Zeus' erotic desire from two different and congruent female perspectives: Io's and the Oceanids'. This angle strengthens the play's characterization of Zeus as an arbitrary and terrifying tyrant, whose lust, if left completely unchecked, will be his downfall (e.g. *PV* 760-70, 908-27). Yet, at the same time, the tragedy revisits the treatment of such sexual unions in the genealogical poetry that was circulating under Hesiod's name. The *PV* draws attention to the omission of the female perspective in the Hesiodic tradition and, by restoring the female voice, exposes the tension between the celebratory frame of genealogical poetry and the horror of Io's experience. Even the prospect of glorious offspring that validates and glorifies sexual unions between gods and mortals in the *Catalogue* (fr. 1.16 MW) fails to console the women of the *PV*. Io learns about her restitution and the birth of Epaphos (*PV* 844-

52), but she is robbed of her chance to react by a new attack of madness. The Oceanids' vision of sleeping with the Olympians, on the other hand, does not include the prospect of offspring at all. As the tragedy reassesses genealogical poetry from a female perspective, vulnerability, fear, and misery outweigh the hopeful prospect of illustrious offspring.

Bibliography

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