

Begging Perses

The inconsistent character of Perses has been a central topic of debate in the interpretation of Hesiod's *Works and Days*. In the first part of the poem, Perses is apparently planning to seek to take property, presumably the speaker's, by legal means, and he and the *basileis* are repeatedly warned against injustice. Then, at 383, the poem turns to advice about the chores to be performed at specific seasons. The *basileis* vanish completely, and Perses is no longer threatening the speaker, but has come to beg from him (396-7) and is warned not to do so again:

ὥς καὶ νῦν ἐπ' ἔμ' ἦλθες· ἐγὼ δέ τοι οὐκ ἐπιδώσω
οὐδ' ἐπιμετρήσω· ἐργάζεσθαι, νῆπιε Πέρση (WD 395-6)

He is apparently in debt (404). He is again admonished to work, but is now lazy and parasitic rather than unjust. It is very hard to imagine that the Perses who has sued or threatened to sue his brother is the same person who has recently come to him for help (Schmidt 1986, 51 suggests that the quarrel did not cause a permanent estrangement; Clay 2003, 34-36 makes the implausible suggestion that Perses' litigation was not directed at his brother and the quarrel is about his begging). Perses is still the addressee of 646-7, but disappears completely in the ritual injunctions and the Days at the conclusion.

Many scholars since antiquity (Sch. 27a) have denied the historical reality of Perses. West generally follows the argument of Wilamowitz (Wilamowitz 1928, 133-5): the poem assumes that Perses is converted by the sermon on justice and then needs to be taught how to work. West also argues that Perses is unlikely to be invented because "no one supposes Hesiod himself to be an assumed character" (West 1978, 34); however, it is now almost the standard view that Hesiod himself is indeed a legendary character (Lamberton 1988, 23, Nagy 1990, 72-4, Martin 1992, Rousseau 1993), and that the entire setting of the poem is fiction. This paper will argue that it is not difficult to imagine a series of real events that could lie behind the poem, but that the poetic sequence does not follow this possible chronology.

A scenario that reverses the chronology typically inferred from the sequence in the poem would run: Perses borrowed; when could not longer borrow from his brother or from other neighbors (398-403), he resorted to legal means. If the poem followed such a chronology, there would be no serious problem of consistency. One may speculate that the poem grew in this way over time—that is, that the most famous section, the sermon on justice that introduces *WD*, was the last part to be added.

The shape of the poem as it stands is rhetorically much more effective than this imaginary version. *WD* as it stands begins effectively, with a dramatic conflict. Within the internal time of the poem, Perses indeed appears to be at least partially converted. Although the poem does not chart a uniform progress (for example, some of the gnomes in the first part, like those of 361-80, presuppose the prosperity won by the work of the next section), its implied audience initially needs to be warned against wickedness, then against idleness and incompetence; but by the end it learns details of how to be a θεῖος ἀνὴρ (731). While the *basileis* are fools because they do not know the precepts of 40-41, some of the instructions of the Almanac are more technical, those of the Nautilia even more so, and by the end the audience is ready for recondite knowledge (824), the Days.

We do not need to assume that the autobiographical material is true; it is still worth considering whether a plausible story can be reconstructed from the narrative discourse. The difference between this possible sequence of real events and the poem clarifies how *WD* progresses.

Bibliography

- Clay, J. S. (2003). *Hesiod's Cosmos*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lamberton, R. Hesiod. (1988). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Martin, R. (1992) "Homer's Metanastic Poetics." *Ramus* 21: 11-33.
- Nagy, G. (1990). *Greek Mythology and Poetics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Rousseau, P. (1993). "Un Héritage disputé." In Arrighetti, G. and Montanari, F. *La Componente autobiografica nella poesia greca e latina fra realtà e artificio letterario: atti del convegno, Pisa, (16-17 maggio 1991)*. Pisa: Giardini, 41-72.

Schmidt, J. (1986) *Adressat und Paraineseform: zur Intention von Hesiods "Werken und Tagen"*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

West, M. L. (1978). *Hesiod, Works & Days*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, U. von. (1928). *Hesiodos Erga*. Berlin: Weidmann.