

## The Personhood of Hesiod

Many recent scholars have seen "Hesiod" as a fiction, as "collective expression" rather than "individual talent." In this view, while there may once have been a poet who called himself "Hesiod," the poems attributed to him were developed through the process of repeated recomposition in performance and attributed to a legendary bard named Hesiod (e.g. Lamberton 1988, 10-11; Nagy 1990, 72-74; Rosen 1990; Martin 1992; Aloni 2010; Tsagalis 2009). This is surely in part a reaction against biographical criticism, but it has also led to allegorical interpretation of autobiographical material. Autobiographical information indeed serves rhetorical goals, (Griffith 1983) and much of the content of both Hesiodic poems is traditional. However, while if we believe that the poet of *Theogony* and *Works and Days* was a particular individual, our only serious explanatory difficulty is the inconsistency in the character of Perses. If "Hesiod" is a fiction, each detail must either have begun with an earlier poet or been invented for some reason. Ockham's razor applies.

Hesiodic poetry is at once traditional and innovative. It is impossible to be confident about tradition and innovation in the genealogies of *Theogony*, but it is hard not to suspect that some of the assignments of abstractions without cult represent an individual's decision about how to organize the divine world. While there are many Near Eastern parallels for the general wisdom components of *Works and Days*, there are none for the combination of such wisdom teaching in poetic form with the presentation of agricultural information, ritual advice, and esoteric knowledge about good and bad days.

For example, the poet names springs on Mt. Helicon (*Theog.*5-6) and mentions an altar of Zeus, claims a close connection to the Heliconian Muses, and says that he dedicated a tripod to them (*WD* 658-9). It is hard to imagine a poet attributing a non-existent tripod to a legendary

predecessor, and unlikely that poets from farther away would know Helicon in such detail. If this is a tradition, it must be very local. Similarly, he claims to have won this tripod at a specific event (*WD* 644-5), one that would probably have been remembered. We may not believe that the poet encountered the Furthermore, the speaker claims to come from Ascra. Ascra, though a fertile and pleasant spot (despite *WD* 639-40), is out of the way and had no associations with the heroic past (even if Zenodotus read “Ascra” for “Arne” at *Il.*2.507). There would be no plausible reason for anyone to choose it as the place of origin for a fictional Hesiod; while it might be useful in Panhellenic contexts to have a neutral origin, Ascra is utterly obscure. Only someone from the area would have heard of the place. Scholars have sometimes spoken of “Boeotian” tradition, but Hesiod locates himself in an odd corner of Boeotia—about 25K from Thebes, for example. Aeolic Cyme, which is named as the home of the poet’s father, was a well-known place, which makes it hard to imagine that Ascra was chosen for its obscurity. It is, of course, possible that an “original” Hesiod is the source for this material, while later poets composed in his name, but there is no need for this greater complexity.

Hesiod advises the farmer about collecting wood for tools in early autumn (422). The poet seems to assume that diverse woodlands are nearby so that the farmer can easily collect his own wood. This was surely not the case in many places, but it suits a farmer at the base of Helicon.

If Hesiod’s autobiographical information is essentially true, we need to be attentive towards his reasons for providing it when and how he does, but we also need to be cautious about overinterpretation.

## Bibliography

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