

## The Animist's Worldview and Hesiod's *Theogony*

Modern thought often makes a clear distinction between the living and the non-living world. Humans, animals, and plants are alive while rocks, oceans, and atmospheres are not. However, early Greek poets such as Hesiod appear to operate under a more animistic worldview, where earth and sky and sea are not only landscapes but living divinities with their own will, desires, and reproductive capabilities. Rather than harsh delineations, the animistic world holds “permeable boundaries between living and nonliving, animate and inanimate, spiritual and material” (Nichols 3). When Hesiod is read through the lens of this older view, it becomes apparent that modern divisions between life and non-life have obscured the *Theogony*'s more fluid idea of being. The ambiguities of poetic language allow Hesiod to sustain and exploit this duality of representation so that gods are never wholly anthropomorphic or elemental, but always both at once. Cosmology becomes theogony as the poet presents the vastness of primordial entities in a familiar, human form.

In order to better capture the more fluid manner in which Hesiod portrays his gods, I use three categories to describe the implied form of a god at any given point of the poem, which can change quickly and without fanfare. The first is anthropomorphic, where the god is described in humanoid terms. The second is hylomorphic, where the divinity is described in terms of elemental forms (i.e. earth, sea, sky). The final category is hoplomorph, where gods function as tools for other gods, often taking a form that gods can hold with their hands. Of particular interest are divinities who take all three forms and shift between them with great fluidity.

This paper examines the Cyclopes, who in addition to their explicit anthropomorphic form can also be interpreted as hylomorphic (thunder, lightning, flashing, and bolt [Hes.*Th.* 140–41]) as well as hoplomorph as the ranged weapons of Zeus. It then examines Styx, who

holds the anthropomorphic form of a woman at court, the hylomorphic form of a river, and the hoplomorphic form of the water poured out of a cup for the gods' oaths. Through these examples I show that modern concepts of personification compel the reader to limit these gods to one form, whereas Hesiod's poetry allows them to flow between representations however the narrative requires. Through a better understanding of animist paradigms and the ways in which Hesiod codes these beliefs into poetic devices, the reader can better understand the nature of Hesiod's gods.

### Bibliography

Burkert, Walter. "Hesiod in Context: Abstractions and Divinities in an Aegean-Eastern Koiné."

*In Personification in the Greek World: From Antiquity to Byzantium*. Eds. Emma Stafford and Judith Herrin. Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005. 3–20.

Clay, Jenny. "The Generation of Monsters in Hesiod." *CP* 88 (1993): 105–116.

Hansen, William. "Foam-born Aphrodite and the Mythology of Transformation." *AJP* 121 (2000): 1–19.

López-Ruiz, C. *When the Gods were Born: Greek Cosmogonies and the Near East*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Mondi, Robert. "Χαος and the Hesiodic Cosmogony." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 92 (1989): 1–41.

Nichols, Ashton, ed. *Romantic Natural Histories: William Wordsworth, Charles Darwin, and Others*. Boston: Houghton, 2004.

Paxson, James. *The Poetics of Personification*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Thalman, W. G. *Conventions of Form and Thought in Early Greek Epic Poetry*. Baltimore, NJ: John Hopkins University Press, 1984.

Webster, T. B. L. "Personification as a Mode of Greek Thought," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 17, No. 1/2 (1954), 10–21.