HESIOD

THE WORKS AND INFLUENCE OF HESIOD

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The Works and Influence of Hesiod

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INTRODUCTION

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General

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The early Greek epic—that is, poetry as a natural and popular, and not (as it became later) an artificial and academic literary form—passed through the usual three phases, of development, of maturity, and of decline.

No fragments which can be identified as belonging to the first period survive to give us even a general idea of the history of the earliest epic, and we are therefore thrown back upon the evidence of analogy from other forms of literature and of inference from the two great epics which have come down to us. So reconstructed, the earliest period appears to us as a time of slow development in which the characteristic epic metre, diction, and structure grew up slowly from crude elements and were improved until the verge of maturity was reached.

The second period, which produced the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, needs no description here: but it is very important to observe the effect of these poems on the course of post-Homeric epic. As the supreme perfection and universality of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* cast into oblivion whatever pre-Homeric poets had essayed, so these same qualities exercised a paralysing influence over the successors of Homer. If they continued to sing like their great predecessor of romantic themes, they were drawn as by a kind of

magnetic attraction into the Homeric style and manner of treatment, and became mere echoes of the Homeric voice: in a word, Homer had so completely exhausted the epic *genre*, that after him further efforts were doomed to be merely conventional. Only the rare and exceptional genius of Vergil and Milton could use the Homeric medium without loss of individuality: and this quality none of the later epic poets seem to have possessed. Freedom from the domination of the great tradition could only be found by seeking new subjects, and such freedom was really only illusionary, since romantic subjects alone are suitable for epic treatment.

In its third period, therefore, epic poetry shows two divergent tendencies. In Ionia and the islands the epic poets followed the Homeric tradition, singing of romantic subjects in the now stereotyped heroic style, and showing originality only in their choice of legends hitherto neglected or summarily and imperfectly treated. In continental Greece [1101], on the other hand, but especially in Boeotia, a new form of epic sprang up, which for the romance and PATHOS of the Ionian School substituted the practical and matter-of-fact. It dealt in moral and practical maxims, in information on technical subjects which are of service in daily life—agriculture, astronomy, augury, and the calendar—in matters of religion and in tracing the genealogies of men. Its attitude is summed up in the words of the Muses to the writer of the *Theogony*: ‘We can tell many a feigned tale to look like truth, but we can, when we will, utter the truth’ (*Theogony* 26-27). Such a poetry could not be permanently successful, because the subjects of which it treats—if

susceptible of poetic treatment at all—were certainly not suited for epic treatment, where unity of action which will sustain interest, and to which each part should contribute, is absolutely necessary. While, therefore, an epic like the *Odyssey* is an organism and dramatic in structure, a work such as the *Theogony* is a merely artificial collocation of facts, and, at best, a pageant. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that from the first the Boeotian school is forced to season its matter with romantic episodes, and that later it tends more and more to revert (as in the *Shield of Heracles*) to the Homeric tradition.

The Boeotian School

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How did the continental school of epic poetry arise? There is little definite material for an answer to this question, but the probability is that there were at least three contributory causes. First, it is likely that before the rise of the Ionian epos there existed in Boeotia a purely popular and indigenous poetry of a crude form: it comprised, we may suppose, versified proverbs and precepts relating to life in general, agricultural maxims, weather-lore, and the like. In this sense the Boeotian poetry may be taken to have its germ in maxims similar to our English

> “Till May be out, ne’er cast a clout,”

or

“A rainbow in the morning
Is the Shepherd’s warning.”

Secondly and thirdly we may ascribe the rise of the new epic to the nature of the Boeotian people and, as already remarked, to a spirit of revolt against the old epic. The Boeotians, people of the class of which Hesiod represents himself to be the type, were essentially unromantic; their daily needs marked the general limit of their ideals, and, as a class, they cared little for works of fancy, for pathos, or for fine thought as such. To a people of this nature the Homeric epos would be inacceptable, and the post-Homeric epic, with its conventional atmosphere, its trite and hackneyed diction, and its insincere sentiment, would be anathema. We can imagine, therefore, that among such folk a settler, of Aeolic origin like Hesiod, who clearly was well acquainted with the Ionian epos, would naturally see that the only outlet for his gifts lay in applying epic poetry to new themes acceptable to his hearers.

Though the poems of the Boeotian school [1102] were unanimously assigned to Hesiod down to the age of Alexandrian criticism, they were clearly neither the work of one man nor even of one period: some, doubtless, were fraudulently fathered on him in order to gain currency; but it is probable that most came to be regarded as his partly because of their general character, and partly because the names of their real authors were lost. One fact in this attribution is remarkable—the veneration paid to Hesiod.

Life of Hesiod

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Our information respecting Hesiod is derived in the main from notices and allusions in the works attributed to him, and to these must be added traditions concerning his death and burial gathered from later writers.

Hesiod's father (whose name, by a perversion of *Works and Days*, 299 PERSE DION GENOS to PERSE, DION GENOS, was thought to have been Dius) was a native of Cyme in Aeolis, where he was a seafaring trader and, perhaps, also a farmer. He was forced by poverty to leave his native place, and returned to continental Greece, where he settled at Ascra near Thespiae in Boeotia (*Works and Days*, 636 ff.). Either in Cyme or Ascra, two sons, Hesiod and Perses, were born to the settler, and these, after his death, divided the farm between them. Perses, however, who is represented as an idler and spendthrift, obtained and kept the larger share by bribing the corrupt "lords" who ruled from Thespiae (*Works and Days*, 37-39). While his brother wasted his patrimony and ultimately came to want (*Works and Days*, 34 ff.), Hesiod lived a farmer's life until, according to the very early tradition preserved by the author of the *Theogony* (22-23), the Muses met him as he was tending sheep on Mt. Helicon and "taught him a glorious song"—doubtless the *Works and Days*. The only other personal reference is to his victory in a poetical contest at the funeral games of Amphidamas at Chalcis in Euboea, where he won the prize, a tripod, which he dedicated to the Muses of Helicon (*Works and Days*, 651-9).

Before we go on to the story of Hesiod's death, it will be well to inquire how far the "autobiographical" notices can be treated as historical, especially as many critics treat some,

or all of them, as spurious. In the first place attempts have been made to show that “Hesiod” is a significant name and therefore fictitious: it is only necessary to mention Goettling’s derivation from IEMI to ODOS (which would make ‘Hesiod’ mean the ‘guide’ in virtues and technical arts), and to refer to the pitiful attempts in the *Etymologicum Magnu* (*s.v.* {H}ESIODUS), to show how prejudiced and lacking even in plausibility such efforts are. It seems certain that “Hesiod” stands as a proper name in the fullest sense. Secondly, Hesiod claims that his father—if not he himself—came from Aeolis and settled in Boeotia. There is fairly definite evidence to warrant our acceptance of this: the dialect of the *Works and Days* is shown by Rzach [1103] to contain distinct Aeolisms apart from those which formed part of the general stock of epic poetry. And that this Aeolic speaking poet was a Boeotian of Ascra seems even more certain, since the tradition is never once disputed, insignificant though the place was, even before its destruction by the Thespians.

Again, Hesiod’s story of his relations with his brother Perses have been treated with scepticism (*see* Murray, *Anc. Gk. Literature*, pp. 53-54): Perses, it is urged, is clearly a mere dummy, set up to be the target for the poet’s exhortations. On such a matter precise evidence is naturally not forthcoming; but all probability is against the sceptical view. For 1) if the quarrel between the brothers were a fiction, we should expect it to be detailed at length and not noticed allusively and rather obscurely—as we find it; 2) as MM. Croiset remark, if the poet needed a lay-figure the ordinary practice was to introduce some mythological

person—as, in fact, is done in the *Precepts of Chiron*. In a word, there is no more solid ground for treating Perses and his quarrel with Hesiod as fictitious than there would be for treating Cyrnus, the friend of Theognis, as mythical.

Thirdly, there is the passage in the *Theogony* relating to Hesiod and the Muses. It is surely an error to suppose that lines 22-35 all refer to Hesiod: rather, the author of the *Theogony* tells the story of his own inspiration by the same Muses who *once* taught Hesiod glorious song. The lines 22-3 are therefore a very early piece of tradition about Hesiod, and though the appearance of Muses must be treated as a graceful fiction, we find that a writer, later than the *Works and Days* by perhaps no more than three-quarters of a century, believed in the actuality of Hesiod and in his life as a farmer or shepherd.

Lastly, there is the famous story of the contest in song at Chalcis. In later times the modest version in the *Works and Days* was elaborated, first by making Homer the opponent whom Hesiod conquered, while a later period exercised its ingenuity in working up the story of the contest into the elaborate form in which it still survives. Finally the contest, in which the two poets contended with hymns to Apollo [1104], was transferred to Delos. These developments certainly need no consideration: are we to say the same of the passage in the *Works and Days?* Critics from Plutarch downwards have almost unanimously rejected the lines 654-662, on the ground that Hesiod's Amphidamas is the hero of the Lelantine Wars between Chalcis and Eretria, whose death may be placed *circa* 705 B.C.—a date which is obviously too low for the genuine Hesiod. Nevertheless,

there is much to be said in defence of the passage. Hesiod's claim in the *Works and Days* is modest, since he neither pretends to have met Homer, nor to have sung in any but an impromptu, local festival, so that the supposed interpolation lacks a sufficient motive. And there is nothing in the context to show that Hesiod's Amphidamas is to be identified with that Amphidamas whom Plutarch alone connects with the Lelantine War: the name may have been borne by an earlier Chalcidian, an ancestor, perhaps, of the person to whom Plutarch refers.

The story of the end of Hesiod may be told in outline. After the contest at Chalcis, Hesiod went to Delphi and there was warned that the 'issue of death should overtake him in the fair grove of Nemean Zeus.' Avoiding therefore Nemea on the Isthmus of Corinth, to which he supposed the oracle to refer, Hesiod retired to Oenoe in Locris where he was entertained by Amphiphanes and Ganyetor, sons of a certain Phegeus. This place, however, was also sacred to Nemean Zeus, and the poet, suspected by his hosts of having seduced their sister [1105], was murdered there. His body, cast into the sea, was brought to shore by dolphins and buried at Oenoe (or, according to Plutarch, at Ascra): at a later time his bones were removed to Orchomenus. The whole story is full of miraculous elements, and the various authorities disagree on numerous points of detail. The tradition seems, however, to be constant in declaring that Hesiod was murdered and buried at Oenoe, and in this respect it is at least as old as the time of Thucydides. In conclusion it may be worth while to add the graceful epigram of Alcaeus of Messene (*Palatine Anthology*, vii 55).

“When in the shady Locrian grove Hesiod lay dead, the Nymphs washed his body with water from their own springs, and heaped high his grave; and thereon the goat-herds sprinkled offerings of milk mingled with yellow-honey: such was the utterance of the nine Muses that he breathed forth, that old man who had tasted of their pure springs.”

The Hesiodic Poems

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The Hesiodic poems fall into two groups according as they are didactic (technical or gnomic) or genealogical: the first group centres round the *Works and Days*, the second round the *Theogony*.

I. “The Works and Days”

The poem consists of four main sections. (*a*) After the prelude, which Pausanias failed to find in the ancient copy engraved on lead seen by him on Mt. Helicon, comes a general exhortation to industry. It begins with the allegory of the two Strifes, who stand for wholesome Emulation and Quarrelsomeness respectively. Then by means of the Myth of Pandora the poet shows how evil and the need for work first arose, and goes on to describe the Five Ages of the World, tracing the gradual increase in evil, and emphasizing the present miserable condition of the world, a condition in which struggle is inevitable. Next, after the Fable of the Hawk and Nightingale, which serves as a condemnation of violence and injustice, the poet passes on to contrast the blessing which Righteousness brings to a nation, and the

punishment which Heaven sends down upon the violent, and the section concludes with a series of precepts on industry and prudent conduct generally. (*b*) The second section shows how a man may escape want and misery by industry and care both in agriculture and in trading by sea. Neither subject, it should be carefully noted, is treated in any way comprehensively. (*c*) The third part is occupied with miscellaneous precepts relating mostly to actions of domestic and everyday life and conduct which have little or no connection with one another. (*d*) The final section is taken up with a series of notices on the days of the month which are favourable or unfavourable for agricultural and other operations.

It is from the second and fourth sections that the poem takes its name. At first sight such a work seems to be a miscellany of myths, technical advice, moral precepts, and folklore maxims without any unifying principle; and critics have readily taken the view that the whole is a canto of fragments or short poems worked up by a redactor. Very probably Hesiod used much material of a far older date, just as Shakespeare used the *Gesta Romanorum*, old chronicles, and old plays; but close inspection will show that the *Works and Days* has a real unity and that the picturesque title is somewhat misleading. The poem has properly no technical object at all, but is moral: its real aim is to show men how best to live in a difficult world. So viewed the four seemingly independent sections will be found to be linked together in a real bond of unity. Such a connection between the first and second sections is easily seen, but the links between these and the third and fourth are no less real: to make life go

tolerably smoothly it is most important to be just and to know how to win a livelihood; but happiness also largely depends on prudence and care both in social and home life as well, and not least on avoidance of actions which offend supernatural powers and bring ill-luck. And finally, if your industry is to be fruitful, you must know what days are suitable for various kinds of work. This moral aim—as opposed to the currently accepted technical aim of the poem—explains the otherwise puzzling incompleteness of the instructions on farming and seafaring.

Of the Hesiodic poems similar in character to the *Works and Days*, only the scantiest fragments survive. One at least of these, the *Divination by Birds*, was, as we know from Proclus, attached to the end of the *Works* until it was rejected by Apollonius Rhodius: doubtless it continued the same theme of how to live, showing how man can avoid disasters by attending to the omens to be drawn from birds. It is possible that the *Astronomy* or *Astrology* (as Plutarch calls it) was in turn appended to the *Divination*. It certainly gave some account of the principal constellations, their dates of rising and setting, and the legends connected with them, and probably showed how these influenced human affairs or might be used as guides. The *Precepts of Chiron* was a didactic poem made up of moral and practical precepts, resembling the gnomic sections of the *Works and Days*, addressed by the Centaur Chiron to his pupil Achilles. Even less is known of the poem called the *Great Works*: the title implies that it was similar in subject to the second section of the *Works and Days*, but longer. Possible references in Roman writers [1106] indicate that among the

subjects dealt with were the cultivation of the vine and olive and various herbs. The inclusion of the judgment of Rhadamanthys (frag. 1): “If a man sow evil, he shall reap evil,” indicates a gnomic element, and the note by Proclus [1107] on *Works and Days* 126 makes it likely that metals also were dealt with. It is therefore possible that another lost poem, the *Idaean Dactyls*, which dealt with the discovery of metals and their working, was appended to, or even was a part of the *Great Works*, just as the *Divination by Birds* was appended to the *Works and Days*.

II. The Genealogical Poems

The only complete poem of the genealogical group is the *Theogony*, which traces from the beginning of things the descent and vicissitudes of the families of the gods. Like the *Works and Days* this poem has no dramatic plot; but its unifying principle is clear and simple. The gods are classified chronologically: as soon as one generation is catalogued, the poet goes on to detail the offspring of each member of that generation. Exceptions are only made in special cases, as the Sons of Iapetus (ll. 507-616) whose place is accounted for by their treatment by Zeus. The chief landmarks in the poem are as follows: after the first 103 lines, which contain at least three distinct preludes, three primeval beings are introduced, Chaos, Earth, and Eros—here an indefinite reproductive influence. Of these three, Earth produces Heaven to whom she bears the Titans, the Cyclopes and the hundred-handed giants. The Titans, oppressed by their father, revolt at the instigation of Earth, under the leadership of Cronos, and as a result Heaven and

Earth are separated, and Cronos reigns over the universe. Cronos knowing that he is destined to be overcome by one of his children, swallows each one of them as they are born, until Zeus, saved by Rhea, grows up and overcomes Cronos in some struggle which is not described. Cronos is forced to vomit up the children he had swallowed, and these with Zeus divide the universe between them, like a human estate. Two events mark the early reign of Zeus, the war with the Titans and the overthrow of Typhoeus, and as Zeus is still reigning the poet can only go on to give a list of gods born to Zeus by various goddesses. After this he formally bids farewell to the cosmic and Olympian deities and enumerates the sons born of goddess to mortals. The poem closes with an invocation of the Muses to sing of the "tribe of women".

This conclusion served to link the *Theogony* to what must have been a distinct poem, the *Catalogues of Women*. This work was divided into four (Suidas says five) books, the last one (or two) of which was known as the *Eoiae* and may have been again a distinct poem: the curious title will be explained presently. The *Catalogues* proper were a series of genealogies which traced the Hellenic race (or its more important peoples and families) from a common ancestor. The reason why women are so prominent is obvious: since most families and tribes claimed to be descended from a god, the only safe clue to their origin was through a mortal woman beloved by that god; and it has also been pointed out that *mutterrecht* still left its traces in northern Greece in historical times.

The following analysis (after Marckscheffel) [1108] will show the principle of its composition. From Prometheus and Pronoia sprang Deucalion and Pyrrha, the only survivors of the deluge, who had a son Hellen (frag. 1), the reputed ancestor of the whole Hellenic race. From the daughters of Deucalion sprang Magnes and Macedon, ancestors of the Magnesians and Macedonians, who are thus represented as cousins to the true Hellenic stock. Hellen had three sons, Dorus, Xuthus, and Aeolus, parents of the Dorian, Ionic and Aeolian races, and the offspring of these was then detailed. In one instance a considerable and characteristic section can be traced from extant fragments and notices: Salmoneus, son of Aeolus, had a daughter Tyro who bore to Poseidon two sons, Pelias and Neleus; the latter of these, king of Pylos, refused Heracles purification for the murder of Iphitus, whereupon Heracles attacked and sacked Pylos, killing amongst the other sons of Neleus Periclymenus, who had the power of changing himself into all manner of shapes. From this slaughter Neleus alone escaped (frags. 13, and 10-12). This summary shows the general principle of arrangement of the *Catalogues*: each line seems to have been dealt with in turn, and the monotony was relieved as far as possible by a brief relation of famous adventures connected with any of the personages—as in the case of Atalanta and Hippomenes (frag. 14). Similarly the story of the Argonauts appears from the fragments (37-42) to have been told in some detail.

This tendency to introduce romantic episodes led to an important development. Several poems are ascribed to Hesiod, such as the *Epithalamium of Peleus and Thetis*, the