

Hesiod Introduction Part 3

The Ancient Encounter with Hesiod

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"Let him hear the advice of Hesiod. ... The advice of Hesiod is good." — Aristotle

"Lampon ... greatly honors the sayings of Hesiod, the one he declares and recommends to his sons."
—Pindar

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This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Hesiod's Theogony & Works and Days.

NOW THAT WE have explored Hesiod himself, the next question we may ask is this: How, where, or when would have most ancients encountered him and his poetry?

First, they would have done so during public and private performances of the poet's work. Barbara Graziosi remarks that "it [was] through listening to rhapsodes and orators that most Athenians came into contact with Hesiod's poetry."¹ We see evidence for this in Plato with the Athenian's remark already cited above: "We old men would very likely take most delight in listening to the rhapsode giving a fine recitation . . . of a piece from Hesiod." The orator Isocrates similarly reports that some of his friends were

"sitting together in the Lyceum" in Athens listening to a group of sophists "discuss the poets, especially the poetry of Hesiod and Homer." He says that these men were "merely chanting their verses and repeating from memory the cleverest things which certain others had said about them in the past." Finally, he relates that "those standing around the Lyceum applauded their performance."²

Aside from public performances in the marketplace or a gymnasium, Athenians may have heard Hesiod used as case-supporting evidence in court. Lilah Grace Canevaro tells us that Hesiod was "quoted in lieu of evidence in the Athenian law-courts."³ The orator Demosthenes recognizes Aeschines' use of Hesiod in this

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way during a great legal battle they had. “You even quoted verses to the judges because you had no witness to bring forward in support.”⁴

There were also private performances or readings of Hesiod. These often occurred at dinner parties or in other private contexts. One example comes from Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*. Referring to Hesiod and other poets, Socrates explains, “I unroll the treasures that the wise men of old wrote and left behind in scrolls, and I explore them with my friends.”⁵

Socrates’ private exploration of Hesiod brings us to the second place ancients encountered Hesiod, that is, in education. Lilah Grace Canevaro tells us that “by the fourth century BC, Hesiod’s poetry featured in the

school curriculum.”⁶ Referring to wise poets in general, and specifically to Hesiod who “speaks well” concerning “corrupt politicians” and how a city should maintain its distance from these crooked men, the fourth century BC orator Aeschines explains that “for this reason, I think that we commit to memory the sentiments of the poets, so that when we are men, we may make use of them.”⁷ Apparently this memorization of the poets had been going on for some time. The fifth century BC sophist Protagoras explains that just after students have learned to read, “the teachers set the works of good poets before them on their desks to read and make them learn them by heart.”⁸ Hesiod was doubtlessly included among these poets.

So ends Item 3, “Introduction Part 3 – The Ancient Encounter with Hesiod.” **See you in Item 4, “Introduction Part 4 – How Should We Read or Understand Hesiod?”**

NOTES

¹ Barbara Graziosi, “Hesiod in classical Athens: Rhapsodes, orators, and Platonic discourse,” in *Plato & Hesiod*, 111.

² Isocrates, *Panathenaicus* 18-19.

³ Lilah Grace Canevaro, *Hesiod’s Works & Days: How to Teach Self-Sufficiency*, 20.

⁴ See *On the False Embassy* 243, where Demosthenes, without citing his name, quotes the verses of Hesiod that Aeschines used. For the verses, see Hesiod, *Works and Days* 760-764.

⁵ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.6.14. That Socrates is referring to Hesiod, see Andrew L. Ford, “Plato’s two Hesiods,” in *Plato and Hesiod*, 148.

⁶ Lilah Grace Canevaro, *Hesiod’s Works & Days: How to Teach Self-Sufficiency*, 17.

⁷ Aeschines, *Against Ctesiphon* 3.135.

⁸ See Plato, *Protagoras* 325e-326a. Given the number of times Hesiod is cited in the dialogue, he must have been one of the “good poets.”



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