HESIOD’S THEOGONY: OAK AND STONE AGAIN

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Abstract. Line 35 of the Theogony has exercised critics for centuries. Most scholars are divided along two interpretive lines: 1) that the phrase ‘oak and stone’ is proverbial and has to do with personal revelations that have no place in epic; 2) that the line structurally marks the poet’s departure from the bucolic world. These theories are unsatisfactory. This article proposes that verse 35 be understood as a novel form of invitation to examine the value of the entire world.

Among the nettlesome difficulties of text and interpretation in Hesiod’s Theogony is verse 35 (άλλα τί μοι ταύτα περί δρύν ἡ περί πέτρην; ‘But what are these things to me around oak and stone?’) to which M. L. West devotes considerable attention in his Oxford commentary on Hesiod’s poem.1 I wish to review and analyze some of the more prominent interpretations of this verse and add my own interpretation to the already considerable quantity of scholarly opinion. Another examination of the phrase may seem unpromising, given West’s caution that it is best to acknowledge that the truth is lost in antiquity. But as the phrase continues to provoke comment and has been discussed in recent book-length studies of and commentaries on Hesiod, it is still worthy of consideration.

Verse 35 has modern critics divided in the main along two interpretive lines: 1) that the phrase ‘oak and stone’ is proverbial and has to do with personal revelations made by Hesiod in verses 1-34, revelations that have no place in the formal structure of epic poetry; 2) that the line structurally and thematically marks the poet’s departure from an unsophisticated bucolic world, a world symbolized by oak and stone. I disagree with both of these claims.

The number of those critics who interpret the phrase as a proverb involving irrelevant or random speech is legion.2 Munro says that the phrase means ‘anything that comes to mind, at haphazard.’3 Evelyn-White

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2 See West [1] 168. It is unclear how ‘oak and stone’ came to be applied to speech, but West believes that the origin may lie in a Near Eastern text.
3 D. B. Munro, Homer’s Iliad 13-24 (Oxford 1893) 388.
understands it as ‘why enlarge on irrelevant topics?’ This explanation ramifies into others of the same sort, for example, ‘Why do I digress?’, ‘What use is this idle talk?’ or ‘Why expatiate on private matters?’ This last deserves some attention.

In a note on the proem of the Theogony, W. J. Verdenius defends his explanation of verse 35 as meaning ‘Why expatiate on private affairs?’ with reference to Homeric epic, where ‘oak and stone’ figures twice. He says that ‘tree and rock talk is a proverbial expression for personal confidences based on the custom of enlarging on one’s descent.’ The Homeric passages in question are Iliad 22.126f. and Odyssey 19.163. In the Iliad we are on the verge of Hector’s confrontation with Achilles:

οὐδὲ τι μ’ αἰδέσεται, κτενὲς τί δε με γυμνὸν ἔνοικα
οὖν άκα με τε γυναῖκα, ἐπεί κ’ ἀκό τεύχα δύκα.
οὐ μέν πας νῦν ἔστιν ἀπὸ δρυόν ὡδ’ ἀπὸ πέτρης
τῷ δορίζουσί να, ὃ τε παρθένος θύεις τε,
παρθένος θυεῖς τ’ ὁδίζετον ἀλήλοιν.
βέλτερον αὐ’ ἐριδὶ ξυνελαυνέμεν ὅππι τάχιστα:

(22.124-29)

Nor will he revere me, but will slay me naked like a woman, just as I am, when I put down my weapons. Nor is it possible to chat with him from oak and stone the things that a maid and a youth say to one another. Better it is to meet in strife straightaway.

In the first place, the close verbal proximity of ‘oak and stone’ and the confidences shared by young lovers is misleading. It is not so much the case (as Verdenius asserts) that lovers exchange confidences in the seclusion of oak and stone. That is to say that Hector here is providing a simile that particularly emphasizes language and not location. ‘I cannot speak to Achilles as young lovers speak to each other; no confidant he, this Achilles.’ There are two matters at hand here. The reference to young lovers provides a sharp counterpoint to the expected behavior of the hero, who is now confronted with his own cowardice. The reference to ‘oak and stone’ harks back to lines 82-103, wherein Hector receives an appeal from his mother and

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father to avail himself of the safety of the gates (πύλας, 99) and walls
(τειχεῖα, 99)—‘oak and stone.’ To judge from the wider context the mention
of ‘oak and stone’ has little to do with the customary haunts of young lovers.
One cannot, however, deny the notion of personal confidences implicit in the
mention of ‘the things which a maid and a youth say to one another.’
Although ‘oak and stone’ is used in a local sense here, the emphasis is on the
impossibility of Hector having a confidential (unmartial) tête-à-tête with
Achilles from his place of safety in the city.

Verdenius’ claim that ‘oak and stone’ has something to do with
enlarging on one’s descent is based on Penelope’s address to her disguised
husband:

όλλα καὶ ὡς μοι εἶπε τεϊν γένος, ὅπποθέν ἔσσιν
οὗ γὰρ ἀκό δρυός ἔσσι πολυκιάτου ὴδι ἀκό πέτρης.

(Od. 19.162f.)

But tell me your race, whence you are, for you are not from ancient oak or
stone.

While the narrower context could support to some degree the interpretation
dealing with descent, there are still difficulties with which to contend. It is
clear that Penelope is alluding to descent (compare Odysseus’ response, line
166) when she bids her husband speak. Yet it seems that she refers to a
descent of a specific kind. While it may have been part of ancient lore
(πολυκιάτου, ‘ancient’, ‘spoken of old’, 163) that men were derived from
stones or trees\(^8\) (and this is not fully demonstrable), Penelope may be
suggesting something different if we examine once again a wider context.
It could be argued that Penelope’s question suggests that Odysseus is not
mute or inert like oak or stone, or has not been isolated in the country far
from converse with men, and is fully capable of responding to her queries
and providing her with information.\(^9\) Odysseus has already addressed the
mistress of the house with a long introduction (19.106-22) and it must be
clear to her that despite his mendicant-garb, this beggar’s mien displays an
origin that is other than humble or rustic.

Verdenius’ interpretation seems to conflate two separate contexts of

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\(^8\) πολυκιάτου (‘ancient’, ‘spoken of old’, 163) could agree with πέτρης (‘stone’, 163),
but given the flow of the line it should be understood with δρυός (‘oak’, 163); cf. West [1]
167.

\(^9\) It has often been demonstrated that Homeric diction can display different layers of
meaning within its apparently rigid formulaic structure. There is here, as elsewhere, a
figurative as well as literal meaning to these words of Penelope.
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‘oak and stone’ into a single inclusive definition. Further, his proffer of one definition based on two divergent contexts militates against a univocal and hence proverbial reading of the phrase. Verdenius is rather inventing a proverb and we would be better served in accepting óóδ’ ἀπὸ δρυὸς ὁδ’ ἀπὸ πέτρης as a Homeric formula rather than a proverb whose meaning continues to elude us. As far as Hesiod is concerned, it is difficult to assert with Verdenius that Hesiod is following Homer. For one, the phrase is different in the two authors (ἀπὸ in Homer, πεπτ in Hesiod). Even if the collocation of ‘oak and stone’ is proverbial, there is little agreement on what it means. At best it is a proverb ‘dont l’origine et sens exact étaient déjà incertains pour les anciens.’

Let us now examine the interpretation of the second school, which claims that with this verse Hesiod is bidding farewell to the countryside. In the words of Hoffman, verse 35 marks Hesiod’s departure ‘aus dem abgeschiedenen böotischen Tal, um sich anderswo die notwendige Bildung als Sänger und Rhapsode zu verschaffen.’ Mazon is in agreement: ‘dans ce vers controversé, il faudrait interpréter la formule «chêne et rocher» comme l’expression de renoncement du poète à la vie bucolique.’ Here ‘oak and stone’ clearly countrifies Hesiod, putting him squarely within a rural setting. The theories of Mazon and others can in part be explained on a contextual basis, namely, the Muses’ reproach of the shepherd:

ποιμένες ἄγρανοι, κακ’ ἀνέγραξε, γαστέρες οἶον,
λόμεν μενύεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοιν ὁμοία . . .

(26f.)

Field-dwelling shepherds, evil reproaches, mere bellies,
We know how to speak many falsehoods like unto truth . . .

It has long been believed that this divine vitriol belittles the vocation of shepherd for being at the worst crude and at best unsophisticated. But the address is aimed clearly at Hesiod. The plural of the direct address should be construed no differently from the use of the editorial ‘we’ in ‘let us begin.’ Clearly, it is Hesiod who is commencing the Theogony just as it is clear that he, and not shepherding, is the object of Musaic vituperation in

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The assumption is then that the Muses disdain the rustic world symbolized by ‘oak and stone’ and that verse 35 marks a similar disdain in Hesiod. But such is not the case, or else how could one explain Works and Days, a poem later in composition than the Theogony? The vocations of poet and shepherd are not mutually exclusive. Werner Jaeger speaks of Hesiod’s milieu: ‘Country life was not yet synonymous with intellectual underdevelopment.’ Indeed Hesiod responds to this rather acerbic invitation of the Muses but does not abandon the countryside. He is still the field-dwelling shepherd. What is remarkable about the claims that Hesiod is impugning the countryside in favor of becoming an epic poet is that after the question is posed in verse 35 he is still in a rustic setting. He has in effect exchanged one mountainside for another, Helicon for Olympus. Thus the line cannot mark Hesiod’s disdain and subsequent abandonment of the countryside.

It may be helpful at this point to move from the interpretations of the verse to an examination of its function. However the line is interpreted, critics of both schools agree that it forms a kind of boundary. Verdenius contends that the verse marks the end of a personal digression, a departure from the customary content of epic poetry. By making personal revelations Hesiod has violated the conventions of epic. Implicit in this as well is the admission that the life of the shepherd is in itself unworthy of epic treatment. Thus Hesiod abandons the countryside for the more sophisticated world of epic poetry. Hesiod supposedly realizes that his personal conversion from shepherd to poet has no place within the epic scheme, catches himself in the midst of revealing it and hence verse 35. He then moves on to the subject of his poem.

As I have already mentioned, Mazon and Hoffman are in agreement with Verdenius on this score. Moreover, both schools assume that verse 35 is a question of contempt or rough dismissal and is condemnatory of the verses which precede it. But West suggests that it not be seen in this

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13 Critics seem to have considered the Muses’ declaration as a universal affirmative proposition, that is, all shepherds are base. But it is clear that the Muses address only Hesiod and find fault with him not because he is a shepherd but because he has been slow to recognize his poetic calling. Cf. lines 22-24 and 31f.
15 W. Jaeger, Paideia 1 (Oxford 1939) 59.
16 That we have repeated in verses 36f. the language and the topics of the poem’s earlier verses should obviate such a notion.
light. In response to Sittl’s interpretation of the verse (‘But why do I reveal what I saw far from men, among rocks and trees?’) West says, ‘The short answer is, why not? The fact that a miracle happens in a lonely place is no reason for reticence in reporting it.’ West’s brief reply might well have been appropriately uttered by Hesiod himself.

Hesiod is indeed composing epic poetry and employing the meter of Homer. Despite the use of epic language and meter, the audience must have been aware of the novelty of Hesiod’s proemium. It is fair to suppose that Hesiod, presenting a familiar epic device, the proemium, with new content, addressed this verse to his hearers with a view to explaining the novelty of his introduction. Rather than assume that Hesiod asked this question for the reasons others have offered, that is, as condemnatory and perhaps in a tone that indicated disdain of the bucolic world, let us consider the opposite. The question ‘What are these things around oak and stone to me?’ may very well have addressed the wonderment of an audience who was hearing poetry to which it was not fully accustomed, a new topic in old dress. The verse is a boundary of a kind but not the kind hitherto discussed. With it Hesiod defends the recitation of verses 1-34 and binds them to what follows. By dilating upon his conversion in the country, Hesiod is not simply investing the bucolic world with an importance it might not otherwise have; rather, he is giving the innate worth of country life its due poetic expression—and this is what he wishes his puzzled audience to realize.

The importance attached to the bucolic life, the workaday life of the peasant, lies in the didactic purpose to which Hesiod puts his genealogy. Far from bidding a contemptuous goodbye to the country for more sophisticated

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18 Compare Odysseus’ reaction to the songs of Demodocus in Od. 8.521-35. The singer could and did draw a wide range of reactions from the audience.
19 Ernst Siegmann and Kurt Von Fritz attempt to explain the verse not so much by its content as by its placement. For Siegmann, ‘Zu Hesiods Theogonieproömium’, in M. von Schröder (ed.), Festschrift Ernst Kapp (Hamburg 1958) 10, the line works structurally: it marks a boundary (along with verse 22) in the midst of which Hesiod places his account of his summons to be poet. Verse 35 per se receives no special consideration from Von Fritz, ‘Das Proömium der hesiodischen Theogonie’, in F. Beck (ed.), Festschrift Bruno Snell (München 1956) 12-14, who maintains that Hesiod wished to make an individual profession about his poetic calling, but since he could not fit it into the closed scheme of a proemium (36ff.), he prefixed verses 1-35. A variation of this claim is made by W. Aly, cited in Von Fritz [19] 13 n. 20, who makes Hesiod more a footpad than a poet by stating that Hesiod was the reviser and not the author of the poem and that the poem began with verse 36 to which Hesiod affixed the first thirty-five lines.
literary terrain, Hesiod offers an epic on the Homeric model with a rural point of view whose roots are firmly planted in Greek soil—around ‘oak and stone.’ The myths of the gods, which were important for the aristocracy in terms of justifying their rule, were no less important to the peasant who found in these stories the expression of his ‘realistic and pessimistic view on life or . . . the causes of the social difficulties which oppress him.’

The Zeus of the *Theogony* is a bringer of stern justice, whether it be against the Titans for the outrages of Cronus or against mankind for the chicane of Prometheus. Zeus, the remote progenitor of earth-born rulers, oversees and dispenses a justice applicable to aristocrat and peasant alike. Just as the audience of Homeric poetry would already have been familiar with the gods Homer sang, so too would the audience of the *Theogony* have been doubtless aware of the multi-faceted father of gods and men. Zeus is not only βασιλευς21 (‘the king’); he is also ἐνδιδόρος22 (‘the lord of the trees’). As his oracular seat at Dodona testifies, he is associated with the oak (*Od*. 14.328). Further, he is known by the epithet ἵκτεριςς23 (‘the protector of suppliants’), a function that he executes in the *Theogony* (80-93)24 and in *Works and Days*. He is the remote source of justice for those who, like Hesiod, have been deprived of their rightful possessions.25 Thus the functions and responsibilities of Zeus, adumbrated in the *Theogony*, span both heaven and earth, city and country, aristocrat and peasant.

There is no good reason to obelize verse 35, as some have wished to do, or to find fault with Hesiod for some imagined inaptitude or lack of attention. Let the reader/auditor, as I have suggested, think of the verse as a novel form of address, an invitation to reconsider the inherent value of the bucolic life and the wide compass of justice that embraces this life.

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25 The concerns of justice sketched in the *Theogony* are more fully articulated in *Works and Days*, a poem with deeper roots in the countryside and a poem which, to paraphrase Jaeger [15] 66, was not different from the *Theogony* in the poet’s mind despite the difference in subject matter.