The Invention of Stesichorus: Hesiod, Helen, and the Muse*

Jesús Carruesco

Stesichorus was known in antiquity as ὁμηρικώτατος, and his close link with the Homeric tradition of heroic epic poetry is indeed an essential aspect of his work, as has been acknowledged in modern scholarship. This judgment, however, should not lead us to underestimate his relation to Hesiod and the Hesiodic tradition. In a tradition known to Aristotle and Philochorus, Stesichorus was presented as Hesiod’s son. Furthermore, as far as we know the only poet explicitly mentioned in his work is Hesiod, if we are to believe the author of the hypothesis to the Shield of Herakles, which states that Stesichorus acknowledged Hesiod as the author of that poem. The relationship with Hesiod, mainly to the proems of the Theogony and Works and Days, may prove a helpful point of departure for exploring some aspects of the definition of Stesichorus’ persona as representative of a specific kind of poetry. In this paper, I will focus in particular on the relationship of the poet with Helen in the Palinode, where this self-definition was carried out.

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2 Fr. 269 (the numbering of Stesichorus’ fragments used throughout is that of Davies’ and Finglass’ edition). Janko (1986) 41 f., argues for the authenticity of the reference. In that case, Hesiod’s name must necessarily have been mentioned by Stesichorus, whereas in fr. 90, which states that both Homer and Hesiod were criticized by Stesichorus, the allusion may well have been implicit in the refutation of the traditional stories about Helen, as in the preserved lines “you did not go on the well-benched ships and you did not reach the citadel of Troy.” The explicit mention of the names of the epic poets seem to belong to the interpretation of those lines in Chamaeleon’s commentary, as paraphrased by the author of the papyrus. A similar observation could be made for the reference to the obscure poet Xanthus mentioned in fr. 281.
Let us begin with the name of Stesichorus. The phrase χορὸν ἱστάναι is frequently used to mean “setting up the chorus”. As shown by Gregory Nagy, this is a common marker of the function of the chorēgos (as is the analogous χοροστάτις in Alcman’s Partheneion), and through the choral mechanism of ritual substitution or mimetic impersonation, it applies also to the composer as well as to the divine or mythic figure the chorēgos may stand for (Artemis, Aphrodite, or Helen, for instance). To the list of those who may be said to χορὸν ἱστάναι should be added the choreutai, as in many cases there are the dancers themselves who “set up or make up the chorus.”

These correspondences reveal the essentially mimetic nature of choral practice, as a series of interchangeable levels, which is taken up by the name of Stesichorus. This is also brought out by the two documents in which this word is attested as applied to entities other than the poet: the inscription on the François Vase, in which one of the Muses is called Stesichore and an early-5th century cup of Douris, with the expression στησίχορον ὑμνὸν ἄγοισαι (“introducing a stēsikhoros song”). Thus, independently of the precise relationship these two documents may have had with Stesichorus, they prove at the very least that the term can designate not just the poet but also the chorēgos and the choreutai, the Muse, and, most importantly, the song itself (perhaps to be understood as a choral prooimion, if we compare it with the Pindaric phrase ἄγησιχόρων προ-σμίων).7

On the François Vase, the names and groupings of the Muses represented correspond to the Hesiodic text, down to the visual highlighting of Calliope’s status as she opens the march, echoing in Hesiod her placement at the end of the catalogue, with a whole verse dedicated to her: Καλλιόπη θ’. ἣ δὲ προφε-ρεστάτη ἐστὶν ἄπασέων (Hes. Th. 79). The only significant departure from the Hesiodic text is Stesichore, who has been substituted here for Hesiod’s Terpsichore. The choice of the feminine form of Stesichorus’ name in an otherwise purely Hesiodic list implies on the one hand an identification (or at least a close link) between the poet and the Muse, and on the other hand an affiliation to the Hesiodic tradition, whether this iconographic document reflects the Stesichorean innovation or, alternately, it attests to a previously existing variant within the Hesiodic tradition to which Stesichorus adhered.8

5 Pind. fr. 52b. 99; ε. El. 178; Ar. Nub. 271; Paus. 3. 10. 7.
6 PMG 938[c]; cf. Sider (2010).
7 Pind. Pyth. 1.4.
8 Cf. Stewart (1983). Haslam (1991) argues against the direct influence of Stesichorus on the François vase, but this does not exclude other possible links, such as, e.g., a parallel allusion.