HESIOD’S STYLE: TOWARDS AN ANCIENT ANALYSIS

Richard Hunter

I

Perhaps the best known of the few stylistic observations about Hesiod which survive from antiquity is Quintilian’s judgement:¹

raro adsurgit Hesiodus magnaque pars eius in nominibus est occupata, tamen utiles circa praecepta sententiae, leuitasque uerborum et compositionis probabilis, daturque ei palma in illo medio genere dicendi.

Hesiod only rarely rises to the heights and a great part of his work is taken up by names; nevertheless, his gnomic maxims are useful and the smoothness of his diction and word-arrangement is convincing. He wins the palm in the middle style.

Quintilian 10.1.52 = Hesiod T 66 Jacoby, 125 Most

For Quintilian, then, Hesiod is the principal poetic example of the middle style,² which is later briefly described in the tenth chapter of Book 12: the middle style is also called floridum or ἀνθρῳποτύχα (12.10.58), its purpose is delectare or conciliare, its principal characteristic lenitas (12.10.59), it freely accommodates metaphors and figures, and its effect is as soothing as a locus amoenus:³

medius hic modus et tralationibus crebrior et figuris erit iucundior, egressionibus amoenus, compositione aptus, sententiis dulcis, lenior tamquam amnis et lucidus quidem sed uirentibus utrimque ripis inumbratus.

This middle manner is richer in metaphors and made more pleasing by figures; it is made lovely by digressions, has a well-structured composition and the sweetness of sententiae; it is like a gentle river which is translucent but shaded on both sides by verdant river-banks. Quintilian 12.10.60

¹ The present paper may be seen as an expansion and justification and, in one particular, a revision of Hunter (2006a) 128 n. 34 and (2006b) 20. I am grateful to Helen Van Noorden for her helpful criticism of an earlier version.
² Virgil’s Georgics were also assigned to this style, cf. Jocelyn (1979) 73.
The Homeric model for this style is Nestor—“from Nestor’s mouth Homer said flowed forth a speech sweeter than honey and no pleasure greater than this can be imagined” (12.10.64)—and Quintilian’s Homeric paradigm is a commonplace of ancient rhetorical writing. The allusion is, of course, to *Iliad* 1.247–249:

τοῖοι δὲ Νέστωρ

ηδυεπὴς ἀνόρουσε, λιγὺς Πυλίων ἀγορητής,

τοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ γλώσσης μέλιτος γλυκίων ἔεεν αὐθή.

Nestor sweet of speech rose up, the clear-voiced orator of the Pylians; from his tongue flowed a voice sweeter than honey. Homer, *Iliad* 1.247–249

The scholia here note that Nestor’s style is προσηνές καὶ καταστέλλειν ὄργὴν δυνάμενον “soothing and able to calm anger”, whereas αὐστηρά speech “stirs up anger”; here precisely is Quintilian’s distinction, and that of the rhetorical tradition in general, between the soothing “middle” style and the “grand” style which rouses emotion. If Hesiod “only rarely rises to the heights”, this is in explicit contrast to Homer (cf. Quintilian 10.1.46–51), and it is this contrast which, as we shall see, was the most important element in ancient views of Hesiod’s style.

As the principal characteristics of the “middle” style include suavitas and τὸ ἕδυν and τὸ γλυκύ, it is unsurprising that it maps in good part on to what in the rather idiosyncratic scheme of Dionysius of Halicarnassus is called the γλαύφυρα σύνθεσις, the “smooth style”, to which is opposed the αὐστηρά, the “austere”, with a middle or mixed (εὐκράτος) style, as evidenced by Homer, holding the privileged centre-ground; for Dionysius, Hesiod is the hexameter model of the γλαύφυρα σύνθεσις, where he keeps company with such as Sappho, Anacreon and Euripides. The hallmarks of this style include a lively and purposeful flow of words, which are “smooth and soft and maidenly” (*De comp. verb.* 23.2–4, cf. *Demosthenes* 40.1), “delicate and winning figures” (*De comp. verb.* 23.7) which avoid the heaviness of archaism, and the blending of all parts into a single harmonious whole. Dionysius’ judgement of Hesiod in his work *On imitation* was entirely in keeping with this, at least to judge by the abbreviated report in the extant *Epitome*:

---

4 Cf., e.g., [Plutarch], *De Homero* 172 (with Hillgruber ad loc.), Radermacher (1951) 6–9, Kennedy (1957) 26–27.
5 Cf., e.g., Cicero, *Brutus* 40, *Orator* 91–92.
6 Cf. Tavernini (1953) 22.