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*Dual Nature of Nature in Homer and Hesiod*

Nature played an essential role in the lives of the ancient Greeks. At least, their earliest literature suggests that this is so. Although we find relatively few proclamations of Nature's importance in Homer and Hesiod, we see its deep impact on human life and the lives of the gods. In this earliest of Greek poetry, we read about the taming of Nature, its relationship to the gods, and its function as threat or blessing to humankind.

Although Homer and Hesiod never portray Nature's powerful force as completely restrained, they several times suggest that it can be tamed. The first example of this is seen in their views of agriculture and its importance to Greek life. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, practically the entire story focuses on proving to Perses the importance of working the land and reaping a noble harvest. He argues that Nature should be tamed and cultivated by man, and that growing, harvesting, and storing grain is one of the most important duties a man could have (lines 21-41). Hesiod argued that, if a man did not plant and sow his own fields, he had only one other option:

Nature has laid down this law for all whether they live on the plain, or dwell by the sea, or whether far from the stormy deep they farm a rich piece of land in the hollow woodlands: "Strip down when you sow, and strip down again when you plow or reap, if you want to bring home for storage each of Demeter's gifts in the right season." This way each thing will grow in season, and need will not compel you to knock on doors in vain as a beggar. (*Works and Days* lines 388-395)

This is only one example out of many where Hesiod says that if a man refuses to subdue Nature

and cultivate it properly, he will end up as a starving beggar that must live on hand-outs from his neighbors. Not only is it possible to subdue this great force, but Hesiod says that it is actually *necessary* to subdue it in order to live.

One way in which mankind is able to tame Nature is by knowing its secrets. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod explains to Perses several tricks that can be used to subdue nature. The first one is to cut trees to make wagons and plows that can be used to work the land. Although this seems like common sense, Hesiod goes further to say *which* trees he should cut in order to gain the most benefit. He suggests that in order to make a plow, Perses should make the share of oak and the beam of holm oak, while the poles should be made of elm or laurel. These woods are immune to worms and can stand the force of an oxen's kick (lines 435-6).

Another example of a secret of Nature revealed is to know exactly *when* to subdue nature to get the most out of it. Hesiod says to, “Plow in the spring. The fallow land you plow in the summer will not deceive you. Sow fallow land when the soil is still loose; such land will spare you curses and the clamor of hungry children” (lines 462-4). By working the land and using Nature to man's benefit at the right time, food can grow bountifully that will keep a man's family alive and a stranger to hunger for many years. However, if a man does not subdue Nature at the right time and refuses to acknowledge this secret that has been revealed, Hesiod says he will, “reap tiny handfuls, squatting in the dust to cross-bind them with little thrill in your heart” (lines 480-1).

The third way to yield a generous crop by subduing Nature according to Hesiod is to *trick* Nature by throwing mattock and seeds at the same time. Birds—one of Nature's creations—will try to eat the seeds of the field, but will not be able to find them and will take the mattock instead (*Works and Days* lines 470-1). This will yield a large harvest at the *expense* of Nature. All three

of these secrets of Nature that are revealed by Hesiod have a common thread: they *use* Nature to *subdue* Nature. By using Nature's wood, the seasons, and mattock which is grown from the ground, Nature unknowingly allows itself to be oppressed at the hands of men. When a man uses these secrets that Nature should have kept hidden, the fruits of Nature can be exploited by a mortal whose power is miniscule compared to Nature's might.

Another way that mankind tames Nature is seen in the example of *The Odyssey* by Homer. In Book 10, lines 22-30, King Aeolus gave Odysseus an ox-hide sack that was bound with a silver cord. Inside this sack, King Aeolus gave Odysseus the wind. Homer wrote, "Zeus had made that king the master of all the winds, with power to calm them down or rouse them as he pleased" (lines 24-25). The wind is considered one of the most powerful and merciless aspects of Nature (although it can be merciful at times as well), and is often the cause of shipwrecks and ruined harvests. However, this one man bound all the power of the wind in a little sack made of the skin of an ox. King Aeolus not only tamed, but *controlled* one of the most powerful elements offered by Nature. He gave freely, as if it were of no consequence, the power of the wind, and the power to control Nature.

Since Nature is such a powerful force, and man is merely a mortal being, it seems wrong to assume that he could subdue such a menacing power. However, this is addressed in Homer's *The Odyssey*. In Book 7, Odysseus was recently shipwrecked on the island of the Phaeacians and went to King Alcinous looking for help. As he approached the King's palace, he was stopped in his tracks by the beauty of the cultivated land. Homer wrote that fruits were growing on top of one another because there were so many and they were so large, and that grapes bloomed and matured year-round, providing a constant flow of wine and food. Near the end of this beautiful passage, Homer wrote, "Such were the gifts, the glories showered down *by the gods* on King

Alcinous' realm” (lines 155-7). Although Nature is powerful, it can be subdued into a beautiful creation by man with the help of the gods. Of course, the gods do not do this freely. If they are not honored by the owners of the land through gifts and sacrifices, then they can choose to not only keep their blessings from the land, but they can actually destroy whatever harvest the people would have reaped. Man is given control of Nature and can subdue it, but only if he seeks to earn the gods' favor as well.

Although man is given power over Nature and can subdue it, the gods play an important role in Nature as well. For instance, it is clear that Nature is important to the gods, but it gets to the point where the gods actually *rely* on Nature for their own existence. For instance, each god or goddess controls some aspect of Nature. While some gods control the *physical* aspects of Nature (Apollo controls the Sun, Demeter controls the Seasons, Poseidon controls the sea, etc...), others control the *non-physical* aspects (Aphrodite was the goddess of love, Athena was the goddess of wisdom, etc...). Regardless of what they controlled, they all dealt with some aspect of Nature, or the Nature of things. This proves that they had an extremely close connection to Nature, but it is simply too vast for one god or goddess to control all of it at once. Instead, the power is broken up into bits and pieces and distributed for one god or goddess to completely control at any given time.

Due to the fact that they are so close to Nature, the gods and goddesses of the ancient Greek culture and society required sacrifices and offerings in order to be appeased. If Nature was withheld from them—even though they were in control of certain aspects—they would grow extremely upset. An example of this lack of sacrifices is seen in the “Hymn to Demeter.” In this story, Demeter's daughter Persephone is kidnapped and taken to Hades. Since Demeter is the goddess of the seasons and harvest, in her grief, the land ceases to yield crops and food of any

kind. Since the crops do not produce any longer, the people—even if they wanted to—were unable to offer up sacrifices to the Olympian gods and goddesses. This becomes a primary concern on Mount Olympus. Zeus sent Iris, then each of the gods and goddesses in turn to try to bring Demeter to Mount Olympus so she could talk to Zeus in an attempt to restore food and harvests to the people, so they could in turn offer it up to the gods. Finally, after Hades tricked Persephone so she would have to return, she was able to leave the Underworld and see her mother, who then restored life to the fields. Once the harvests came in, the people were again able to offer sacrifices to the gods. While Zeus and the other gods and goddesses tried to help Demeter, they were not doing it because they pitied her, but rather because they relied so much on Nature and the sacrifices of it by men that they had no choice but to get involved. They did not help Demeter for Demeter's sake, they helped her to appease *themselves*.

The story of Demeter shows one aspect of the gods' relationship to Nature, but there are other examples that conflict with this view. In the “Hymn to Demeter,” the gods are viewed as *being* Nature, as opposed to simply being a *part* of Nature. Due to Demeter's sadness, the earth ceased producing food and the people (and gods for that matter) were on the verge of starvation. Nature responded to Demeter's emotions without Demeter purposefully acting upon them. Since Demeter was upset, the parts of Nature that she was associated with (the seasons and harvest) were “upset” as well. However, once Persephone was restored to her mother and Demeter was happy, the harvest again responded directly to her feelings without any provocation. In this example, it would seem that the immortals of Greek religion and literature *were* Nature, instead of simply guiding and controlling it.

There is, however, another view of the gods' relationship to Nature—that they simply have a close relationship to it, as opposed to a completely engrossed link. If they *were* Nature, or

were completely engrossed in their aspect of Nature, then they would know every single event that was happening because it would be happening directly to them. However, a counterpoint to this argument is found in *The Odyssey*. In this book, Poseidon—the god of the sea—needed to travel to Ethiopia because the Ethiopians were holding a large festival Poseidon's honor. With that, he left Greece, but stayed near or in the sea. It was explained earlier in the book that Poseidon was extremely angry with Odysseus because he stabbed Poseidon's son's eye (who was a Cyclops, thus leaving him completely blind). With that, Poseidon vowed that Odysseus' journey home would either be impossible or filled with much hardship. However, once Poseidon left the realm of Greece, Odysseus set out to sea and had absolutely no interference on Poseidon's behalf. It wasn't until Poseidon was returning from Ethiopia that, “from miles away on the Solymi mountain-range he spied Odysseus sailing down the sea and it made his fury boil even more” (Book 5:311-3). Since Poseidon could not *see* Odysseus from Ethiopia, he did not know that he was even sailing on the ocean.

After Poseidon saw Odysseus on the sea and his anger was rekindled, another thing happened that shows that the gods were closely tied, but not completely united with Nature. Poseidon stated, “I'll give that man his swamping fill of trouble!” With that he rammed the clouds together—both hands clutching his trident—churned the waves into chaos, whipping all the gales from every quarter, shrouding over in thunderheads the earth and sea at once” (Book 5:320-34). Unlike Demeter, who did not purposefully stop the production of food because she was sad, Poseidon's anger required action in order to rouse the seas. As portrayed by the previous quote, Poseidon was angry, and *then* prompted action from the waves by churning his trident and raising the waves with physical action. If the gods and Nature had been completely united, these events would have occurred either before or during the time Poseidon expressed his

anger as a direct response to his emotions.

It is clear through these two stories that the gods and Nature have an *extremely* close relationship, sometimes to the point where it seems that the gods *are* Nature. However, as seen in the story of Poseidon in *The Odyssey*, it is still clear that there is an area of separation between the two groups. While this may actually be a beneficial thing that the gods and Nature are not completely intertwined (otherwise Nature would respond to every emotion felt by the gods, creating mass chaos), clearly their power over Nature and the relationship between the two form an exceptionally strong bond.

It is obvious that the relationship between the gods and Nature is very strong, but there is also a strong relationship between Nature and man. While Nature sometimes serves as a blessing to man, it can also be extremely threatening. For instance, as stated earlier, the gods and Nature have an extremely close relationship, and if proper sacrifices are offered, the gods are appeased. This is one way that Nature serves to bless mankind. Once sacrifices are made, Nature is satisfied and can provide smooth sailing for ships, or soft rain for fields.

Other than by straight sacrifices, Nature can bless man *without* the god's approval. One example of this is seen in the Phaeachians' ability to sail the seas. While the description that they provide in *The Odyssey* acknowledges that they are skilled shipwrights, their speed and capability on the seas go far beyond simply well-built ships. The Phaeachians have such a close relationship to Nature that Nature sees fit to bless them to the point where all these sailors have to do is put their ship in the water, and they will be carried off to wherever they need to go. A description of this unity is provided in *The Odyssey* when Homer writes, "So the stern hove high and plunged with the seething rollers crashing dark in her wake as on she surged unwavering, never flagging, no, not even a darting hawk, the quickest thing on wings, could keep her pace as

on she ran, cutting the swells at top speed” (Book 13:96-100). The speed that moves this ship is unnatural, and the only explanation is that Nature favors these sailors and the country that they come from. It is clear that these sailors are not helped by the gods because, as it explains after the Phaeachians dropped of Odysseus in Ithica and were returning home, Poseidon became angry and wanted to punish these men for transporting Odysseus home so quickly. Since these men are blessed by Nature so much, not even the sea-god Poseidon can simply sink their ships and call it complete. Instead, he needs to confuse the sailors so that they crash the ship *themselves*. Then, since Poseidon cannot compete with Nature's power, he is forced to raise up mountains around their sea port instead of sending large waves to destroy all the Phaeachian vessels and cities like he should be capable of. Nature's power is vast, and while the gods are powerful and have a close relationship with Nature, if it does not want to be controlled, there is no being that can contend with it.

Nature can bless mankind in many different ways, but it can also be extremely treacherous. There are hundreds of examples where Nature is seen as an uncaring, ruthless beast that destroys creatures without care. One example of this is seen in *The Odyssey* when Odysseus' ship crashes into some rocks and is completely and hopelessly destroyed. The storm that makes him crash is described as being so strong that the winds alone snap his ship's mast in half, and wave after pounding wave break the ship into pieces (Book 5:344-51). The storm would have undoubtedly killed Odysseus—and he even acknowledges that he could not make it out of the storm alive in line 345—except that an immortal woman, Ino, gave him a scarf that kept him afloat until he could reach shore. Nature's power is seen clearly in this example, and there is no doubt that it can be ruthless and destructive if it wishes to.

Another example of Nature's treacherous ways found in *The Odyssey* is seen in the



example of the Lotus-eaters. While this example does not directly relate to outright destruction and chaos, it still proves to be threatening. In Book 9, several of Odysseus' crew members eat lotus flowers that are offered to them, and a sort of amnesia falls upon them. If it were not for Odysseus' strength and determination to bring his crew back, they would have lived and perished on this island, losing all thought of the home and family that they had worked so hard to see again. Nature's beauty, seen in the image of the flower itself, can prove to be a deadly force that brings destruction to men.

A third description of Nature's threatening ways toward men (and animals, in this case) is seen in Hesiod's *Works and Days*. In this account, Hesiod describes the month of Lenaion as being extremely cold and daunting. He says that, "Wild beasts shiver then and curl their tails under their bellies—chilly wind pierces the shag that coats the breasts even of animals whose skin is covered with deep fur; it will go through the hide of an ox and through a goat's long hair" (lines 512-6). Nature, in this case, not only threatens the lives of ill-prepared men, but also animals that have no refuge from the oppressing chill.

The ancient Greeks viewed Nature as an extremely important element in many of their lasting works, and it is clear that its role in these works was far from trivial. By looking at the "taming" of Nature, its relationship to the Greek gods and goddesses, as well as how it blesses or threatens mankind, it is clear to see that Nature's role was elevated, at times, even higher than the gods.

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