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**“Poor fools, nothing but bellies”  
(Theo 26-27):  
Eating Imagery in Hesiod as  
Personification of Oppression**

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*Delivered during the 1999 meeting at the University of Notre Dame, this paper discusses the symbolic power of food imagery, especially its use in the cultural construction of humanity and in the process of dehumanization of oppressed groups. Tracing the use of food and eating imagery to the early seventh century BCE Greek poet Hesiod, Flint-Hamilton demonstrates the importance of studying early Classical texts to help us better understand modern-day oppression and the legacy of slavery.*

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Food represents survival. This is as true today as it was in the ancient world. But food is more than just sustenance. Food, diet, and eating have important sociocultural significance. What we eat, when and how we eat, and with whom are important cultural symbols, revealing a great deal about who we are and how/where we fit into our society.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For a general summary of food in its sociocultural context, see John Wilkins, David Harvey, and Mike Dobson, eds., *Food in Antiquity* (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1995), 1-5; Kimberly Flint-

Some of the most vivid childhood memories of the ex-slaves interviewed by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s and 1940s involve food. Food and eating was used to dehumanize African slaves even as the work of slaves amassed food and wealth for their owners.

Ant Hannah had a trough in her back yard jus' like you put in a pig pen. Well, Ant Hannah would just po' dat trough full of milk an' drag dem chillun up to it. Chillun slop dat milk jus' like pigs.<sup>2</sup>

The image of slave children being fed from a trough like livestock is a recurring theme among the slave narratives. But childhood was not the only time the use of food became a distinguisher between slave and free. Food was used to punish and demoralize slaves. Frederick Douglass described slaves being literally starved to death.<sup>3</sup> Laura Smalley recounted the story of a slave whose owner refused to allow him to be whipped. Instead, his only food after a day of hard work was an ear of corn.<sup>4</sup> Even newborn babies were not exempt from the master's manipulation of

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Hamilton, "Legumes in Ancient Greece and Rome: Food, Medicine, or Poison?" *Hesperia* 68 (1999), 371-385; A. Murcott, ed., *The Sociology of Food and Eating: Essays on the Sociological Significance of Food* (Aldershot, UK: Gower Publishing Company, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Norton Company 1984), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Dover, Delaware: Prestwick House Inc., 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven Miller, *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 19.

food. Stories of new mothers who were forbidden from nursing their babies for adequate amounts of time are far too common.

Mother tole me de overseer would come ter her when she had a young child an' tell her ter go home and suckle dat thing, and she better be back in de field at work in 15 minutes. Mother said she knowed she could not go home and suckle dat child and git back in 15 minutes so she would go somewhere an' sit down and pray de child would die.<sup>5</sup>

It is through the work of the poet Hesiod, a contemporary of Homer,<sup>6</sup> that we begin to see the literary connection between food and freedom, between food and a civilized life, and between food and power. Hesiod, a Boeotian farmer struggling to retain his autonomy in the world of late eighth century BCE Greece where aristocrats, whom he calls barons, were rapidly taking advantage of small farmers and absorbing their property, articulates his anxieties in his epic-length poem, the *Works and Days* (WD). This poem, written as a letter of advice to his brother Perses, purports to describe the tasks of a farmer over the change of seasons. Faced with the very real possibility of losing his land to aristocrats and his freedom to debt-bondage, Hesiod, who refers to his own slaves and

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<sup>5</sup> Sterling, 41.

<sup>6</sup> Modern scholars recognize two Homers – one, the author of the *Iliad*, lived in the early to mid eighth century BCE., and the second, author of the *Odyssey*, lived at the end of the eighth century. Hesiod is a contemporary of the *Odyssey* Homer.

hired laborers in the poem, equates work with liberty and food with power. His poetry is rife with images of food and eating. Hesiod's second epic-length poem, the *Theogony* (Theo), describes the genesis of the Greek gods. The gods of Hesiod, however, are not just the anthropomorphic deities of classical Greek legend. Hesiod's deities include both anthropomorphic gods and monstrous Titans, whose eating habits personify their power.

Scholars have attempted to reconstruct the meaning of the *Works and Days*, from analyzing the language of the poems,<sup>7</sup> the drama of Hesiod's farm,<sup>8</sup> to describing the apparent incongruity of the works with the days,<sup>9</sup> understanding the five ages of humankind,<sup>10</sup> to interpreting the meaning behind the fable of the hawk and the nightingale.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Hesiod's *Theogony*, in addition to being canonical for the study of early Greek religion, has been used to determine to what extent eastern ideas and legends had permeated Greek culture in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.<sup>12</sup> Little has been said, however, regarding the manner in which Hesiod uses the imagery of

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<sup>7</sup> Pietro Pucci, *Hesiod and the Language of Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Nelson, "The Drama of Hesiod's Farm: Notes and Discussions." *Classical Philology* 91 (1996-1997): 235-247.

<sup>9</sup> Andre Lardinois, "How the Days Fit the Works in Hesiod's *Works and Days*." *American Journal of Philology* 119 (1998): 319-336.

<sup>10</sup> A.S. Brown, "From the Golden Age to the Isles of the Blest." *Mnemosyne* LI (1998): 385-410.

<sup>11</sup> Stephanie Nelson, "The Justice of Zeus in Hesiod's Fable of the Hawk and the Nightingale." *Classical Journal* 92.3 (1997): 235-247.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia. Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).

food and eating throughout his texts. The origins of the uses of food as both real and symbolic distinguisher between and among social classes are more than 3000 years old, and the ways that one sees food used in the antebellum South resonate back to early Greece.

In this paper, I examine the many ways in which Hesiod uses food and eating imagery in the *Theogony* and *Works and Days* in an attempt to come to a better understanding of the symbolic nature and cultural meaning of food imagery in early Greece; to recognize the ways that food is used to elucidate the connection among human, non-human, and divine; and, finally, to personify oppression of lower-status groups, such as free laborers and slaves.

Nothing exemplifies servile status more profoundly than one's inability to access food, the most fundamental requirement for life. The slave narratives of the American South refer frequently to agonizing hunger, to having to pick through scraps from the master's table for a meal, and to rations inadequate to the physically demanding fieldwork. Having to depend on another person for food, a person fiscally motivated to provide only the bare essentials and nothing more, was more than humiliating. It could often mean disease or death. Slave women often miscarried or suffered complications from pregnancy due to malnutrition.<sup>13</sup> Ira Berlin, et al's, *Remembering Slavery* refers to stories of children beaten and mutilated for stealing pieces of candy, to a woman forced to eat a boiling-hot chicken as punishment for stealing it (she died

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<sup>13</sup> Sterling , 40.

as a result), and to many other atrocities involving food.<sup>14</sup> The person who controls food also controls life. For slaves, the lines of power are unidirectional, flowing from the power holder – the master – to the powerless.

The work of Hesiod is very significant to our understanding of the psychology and power dynamic of slavery in the American South. Hesiod, living and working with slaves and free poor laborers, understood the value of food in real, symbolic, metaphorical, and philosophical ways. His poetry helps us comprehend the depth of meaning implicit in one's control of food.

Hesiod's poetry articulates the importance of food. For him, food meant the difference between life and death, between a pleasant life and a miserable one, and between a proper life and an improper one. But Hesiod's use of food extended also to the metaphorical. For him, food and eating symbolized proper as well as improper relationships. Eating also represented a vehicle for communication. In *Works and Days*, people use food, in the form of libations and burnt offerings, to communicate with the immortals. The gods in turn reward humans with fertile fields and full barns. Food, then, becomes a sign of a life lived according to a proper moral code. The type of food eaten describes a man as civilized or uncivilized. A meal, when taken with appropriate people, sanctions a gathering that Hesiod otherwise considers purely social and to be avoided. In addition, the process of eating symbolizes a complex dominance hierarchy. The food one eats and the manner in which it is acquired provide evidence of one's place in the

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<sup>14</sup> Ira Berlin et al., 14, 20, 31.

universe, including the barons, the struggling middle-class farmers of which Hesiod was one, and even the slave. Hesiod even uses the imagery of eating to dehumanize. Oppressed groups, such as slaves or working poor, are excluded from the human family by ignoring, or minimizing, their need for food.

The emphasis Hesiod places on food, the energy we spend producing it and our dependence upon it, emphasizes one of the limitations of human beings and acts as a contrast between mortals and the gods who have no need for it. In Hesiod, food represents a point of contact – between mortals and immortals, between mortals and mortals, and between humans and animals. In his world, the food we eat paints a picture of us either as autonomous members of civilized society, uncivilized barbarians, servile and/or destitute, or inhuman monsters. This is true regardless of whether we control our access to food or someone else controls it for us.

### **Food as a distinguisher**

Human beings are unique – distinct, on the one hand, from the gods, and on the other, from animals. This is as true for Hesiod as it is for Homer and Plato. For some, it is our ability to produce crafts that distinguishes us. Consider *Homeric Hymn XX - To Hephaestus*:

With bright-eyed Athene [Hephaestus] taught men glorious crafts throughout the world – men who before used to dwell in caves in mountains like wild beasts. But now that they have learned crafts through Hephaestus the famed worker,



easily they live a peaceful life in their own houses the whole year round.<sup>15</sup>

In the *Iliad*, it is our mortality that acts as the key distinguisher. The gods as well as the heroes of the *Iliad* continually refer to the fact that human beings are destined to die.

To understand humanity in Hesiod, it becomes necessary to determine what makes an entity divine. The divinities of Hesiod – both the anthropomorphic as well as the non-anthropomorphic – are described in detail in the *Theogony*. Hesiod describes their genesis, their strengths and weaknesses, their loves, and their conflicts. He does not, however, state explicitly what it is that makes them divine, leaving that determination to the reader.

Close examination of Hesiod, however, reveals something about his divinities. While vastly different in many other respects such as countenance, strengths, and desires, Hesiod's deities share three attributes. First, they are immortal: *athanatos*. This means, quite literally, that they are without death. Second, gods are ageless: *ageraos* (without old age). Third, Hesiod's gods have a quality called *theios*, which Liddell & Scott<sup>16</sup> define as

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<sup>15</sup> Homeric Hymn XX, "To Hephaestus." Translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, M.A. *Hesiod: The Homeric Hymns and Homeric* (MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1936), 446-447.

<sup>16</sup> Liddell, Scott's Greek-English Lexicon gives the two most commonly used definitions of θεῖος as: 1) of, or from the gods, sent by the θεός, 2) belonging or sacred to a god, in honor of a god, holy. Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon, Founded upon the Seventh Edition of Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, UK: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1992).

godliness or divinity. While this third quality is of questionable value as it pertains to gods – it does us little good to define a term using an adjectival form of the same word – the other two help us pinpoint what it is that makes one divine. Hesiod's gods, then, are deathless, without old age, and, godly.

Humans, by contrast, are mortal: *thanatos*. We must die. Humans also age. And Hesiod occasionally uses the term *theios* to describe extraordinary humans. The manner in which he describes these humans sheds light on the meaning of this word when applied to gods. He uses *theios* three times to describe mortals:

(WD 62 ff) And he bade famous Hephaestus make haste and mix earth with water and to put in it the voice and strength of human kind, and to fashion a sweet, lovely maiden shape, like to the immortal goddesses [*theios*] in face.

(WD 159 ff) The fourth [generation] upon the fruitful earth, which was nobler and more righteous, a god-like [*theios*] race who are called demi-gods.

(WD 731 ff) The night belongs to the blessed gods. A scrupulous man who has a wise [*theios*] heart sits down or goes to the wall of an enclosed court (to urinate).

The adjective *theios*, then, means more than just divine. It also implies that a thing is *more than* human, or beyond humanity.

In addition to the above, Hesiod also refers repeatedly

to the fact that people must eat to live, depending on the earth to provide sustenance. The opening lines of the *Theogony* make this very clear. His Muses address him with these words: “You shepherds of the wilderness, poor fools, *nothing but bellies*.” (Theo 26-27)

Humans are described as *alfestes*; requiring bread:

(WD 80) And he called this woman Pandora because all they who dwelt on Olympus gave each a gift, a plague to men who eat bread.

(Theo 511-512): Scatter-brained Epimetheus who from the first was a mischief to men who eat bread.

And the earth is described as all nourishing, feeding many:

(Theo 531) The glory of Herakles the Theban-born might be yet greater than it was before over the plenteous earth.<sup>17</sup>

For Hesiod, then, it is not the just ability to produce crafts, nor even our mortality, that distinguishes us from the gods. Instead, it is the food that we eat. This is a thread that we can see woven throughout the *Works and Days* as well as the *Theogony*. No fewer than six times, he refers in some way to the fact that humans must eat to live.<sup>18</sup> He refers to

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<sup>17</sup> πολυβότειραν: all nourishing, from the verb βόσκω: feed, tend, nourish (Liddell and Scott Greek-English Lexicon).

<sup>18</sup> WD 82: men who eat bread; WD 521: on the earth who feeds many; Theo 511: men who eat bread; Theo 26: nothing but bellies; Theo 520: the earth who feeds many; WD 301: fill your barn with the substance of living;

eating eighteen times,<sup>19</sup> and to feeding four times.<sup>20</sup> Requiring food is what makes us human.

While Hesiod makes it clear that the deities do not rely on food in the same way as mortals, gods have their own distinctive food. Humans must depend on the earth to produce grain, wine, and the other necessities of life, but the gods eat nectar and ambrosia instead.<sup>21</sup> Zeus gives to the three deities Briareos, Kottos, and Gyes: “all they wished and needed, ambrosia and nectar, which the very gods themselves feed upon (Theo 639).” Withholding ambrosia from them constitutes an effective punishment. The gods who swear upon the waters of Styx are laid flat, and are forbidden from eating ambrosia and nectar for one year (Theo 792).

The same food that confers immortality upon the gods and transforms their blood into divine *ichor* (*Iliad* 5.340, 416) also prevents human decay. In the *Iliad*, e.g., Thetis

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<sup>19</sup> Theo 639: gods eating nectar and ambrosia; Theo 792: gods forbidden from eating nectar and ambrosia; WD 441: give the hired man a loaf; WD 589: eating wine, curd cake, and drinking milk; WD 304: lazy man eats the produce of others; WD 39: bribe eating barons; WD 220: bribe eating barons; WD 264: bribe eating barons; WD 701: wife eating out her husband; Theo 297: Echidna eats raw flesh; Theo 770: Cerberus eats those who try to escape; WD 717: Poverty eats the heart; WD 798: troubles that eat out the heart; WD 209: Hawk and nightingale; Theo 497 and 473: *Cronos* swallows children; Theo 886: Zeus swallows Metis.

<sup>20</sup> WD 452: feed the oxen; WD 604: feed the dog; WD 606: feed the mule and oxen and allow the slaves to refresh themselves; WD 277: wild animals feed on each other.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Graves writes that nectar was more than just a supernatural food. Instead, he suggests that it was a form of mead brewed from fermented honey. Ambrosia, he indicates, was a mixture of barley, oil, and chopped fruit. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: The Folio Society, 1996), 108 and 117.

anoints the corpse of Patroclus with ambrosia so that it would not decay (*Iliad* 19.38ff). Athena pours ambrosia into the nostrils of the fasting Achilles to give him strength (*Iliad* 19.347ff). According to legend, Athena gives Heracles ambrosia to complete his apotheosis.<sup>22</sup> Hesiod, then, uses food not just to distinguish mortals from immortals – mortals eat bread – but also to distinguish immortals from mortals – the gods eat ambrosia and nectar. And it is through food that the occasional human can transform into a deity.

### **Food as point of contact**

In addition to acting as a distinguishing feature, Hesiod also uses food to establish contact between ordered groups. Gods, for example, communicate with humans via food – either offering it or withdrawing it. Humans, on the other hand, communicate with the gods by means of libation or burnt offerings.

The clearest example of this involves Demeter and Gaia. It is Demeter who gives us grain, and she provides it by means of making the earth, Gaia, fertile and productive (WD 31, 230, 236, 301, 392, 465). Hesiod reminds the reader that when Demeter is our friend, our barns are full. And, just as Demeter and Gaia provide grain, Dionysos provides wine (WD 611).

While Demeter and Gaia are the gods Hesiod most frequently regards as providers, he reminds the reader that Zeus is ultimately responsible for our rewards (WD 473).

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<sup>22</sup>S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, eds. “ambrosia,” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Those rewards include bountiful harvest and flocks. Additionally, we require the friendship not just of Zeus, Demeter, Gaia, and Dionysos to be assured of prosperity and fecundity, but of all the immortals (WD 309).

Zeus rewards the barons especially. The high ranking aristocracy, about whom Hesiod complains in several contexts (WD 201-212, 213-224, 237-247, 248-265), are described as blessed of the gods in the *Theogony*. And he describes those blessings as being given in the form of food. The Muses, for example, pour sweet dew upon their tongues in order to render them charismatic and persuasive (Theo 82, 96).

#### Contact between mortals and gods

Just as the gods express themselves to humans by way of food, mortals communicate with gods in a similar fashion, by offerings of food via libations and burnt offerings. In *Works and Days* Hesiod describes libations made by pouring water or wine to the gods (WD 131, 334, 556, 596). Likewise, in *Theogony*, he relates the story of Prometheus, and the subsequent rage of Zeus at having been deceived into choosing the neatly wrapped package of the least desirable parts of the sacrificial animal, the choicest parts being reserved for humans (Theo 535, 556). But it is through the offerings of first fruits and the burning of sacrificial animals that a mortal makes contact with the gods.

Contact between mortals and other mortals: Acceptable vs. unacceptable socializing

In *Works and Days*, Hesiod encourages his reader to spend the bulk of each day working. Indeed, he disdains socializing and gossiping at the blacksmith's shop, insisting instead that there is nearly always something important to be done on the farm. Under certain circumstances, however, he encourages socializing. Those circumstances involve socialized eating – dining. It is appropriate to invite a friend to a meal, especially if that friend is a close neighbor (WD 342). And, while it is acceptable to dine with a friend, it is unacceptable to break bread with an enemy – “have nothing to do with your enemy (WD 342)”. Finally, feasting is considered appropriate, so much so that he cautions the reader not to be disagreeable at a feast (WD 733). Eating, then, has become for Hesiod a catalyst – it transforms an otherwise inappropriate waste of time into a proper social event. Without it, socializing with one's peers degenerates into mere time-wasting gossip.

Contact between mortals and lower humans/animals.

Hesiod's use of food is not limited to contact with gods and other humans of similar rank. He also uses food to establish contact with people of lower rank and with farm animals. His instructions regarding how to choose a *thes* (landless poor laborer) for seasonal help on the farm illustrate this. A 40-year-old man, he says, will keep his mind on work (WD 441). And the appropriate means of communication with this man is by means of a loaf of bread. Hesiod does not elaborate on how to find this man, the nature of instructions to give him, the types of tools to

allow him to access, or even what to do if he fails in his tasks. He only states that the man should be given a full loaf of bread to eat – nothing more. Slaves too are to be allowed to refresh themselves, but Hesiod gives no details whatsoever (WD 607).

On the other hand, Hesiod gives more thorough instructions on the care of livestock. Take the oxen indoors during inclement weather and feed them (WD 452). Do not neglect the dog, but feed him too (WD 604). Bring hay and fodder in for the mules and oxen and feed them as well (WD 606).

Hesiod's advice all but ignores every aspect of care in regards to the hired help, the slaves, and the farm animals, with the single exception of feeding. It is notable that the instructions for treatment of livestock are more detailed than those for slaves or free poor, a trend we see continued in the American South.

Hesiod's references to farm animals highlight their eating habits. Wild animals in Hesiod are characterized by being cannibalistic. But when he instructs farmers to feed the oxen as the crane flies overhead (WD 452), the verb he chooses, *hortazein*, indicates the type of food to be given, *hortos*, which is hay, plant food. Agricultural animals, therefore, consume the products of agriculture also, thus they are civilized and do not need to eat each other. Likewise, Zeus gave humans the gift of *dike* (justice), which we see personified as the virgin daughter of Zeus (WD 248-264). Because of this gift, we are elevated from the status of animals and do not have to eat each other.



### Food used to establish dominance hierarchy

Hesiod uses food and eating also to help define and articulate/delineate the established hierarchical order. He does this via both direct and indirect means. In some cases, i.e., personalities achieve and maintain dominance by eating others. But in other cases, the provider of food maintains a position of dominance over those who depend on them for food. This can be observed in the interaction of humans with gods, upon whom they depend for everything, but also in the interaction of humans with each other.

#### 1. Direct

In several instances in both *Works and Days* and *Theogony*, dominance is established and maintained by eating. While Ouranos tries to preserve his ascendancy by forcing his unborn children back into the womb of Gaia (*Theo* 157-158), his son Cronos, after having learned from Ouranos and Gaia that he was fated to be overcome by one of his sons, swallows down his own children (*Theo* 465-467). Likewise, Zeus too is fated to be overcome by his daughter and the goddess Metis. He swallows Metis in order to prevent his own demise (*Theo* 886-900).

The comments that Hesiod makes regarding this behavior indicate that he considers this form of eating to be inappropriate. Of Ouranos, he says: “And Ouranos rejoiced in his evil doing.” (*Theo* 158). He describes the acts of Cronos as deserving of retribution: “... and that retribution might overtake great, crafty Cronos for his own father and also for the children whom he had swallowed down” (*Theo* 472-474). And Hesiod describes Zeus’ act of swallowing Metis:

“But when she was about to bring forth the goddess bright-eyed Athene, Zeus craftily deceived her with cunning words and put her in his own belly.” (Theo 888-890).

Finally, in the *Works and Days*, the hawk and nightingale parable clearly illustrate this dominance hierarchy. The hawk, in a position of dominance over the captive nightingale, reminds her of his dominance: “If I like, I can eat you for dinner. He is a fool who tries to match his strength with the stronger” (WD 209 ff).

## 2. *Indirect*

While the most powerful statements of power and dominance involve direct eating, indirect statements of dominance are made by references to those who provide food, juxtaposed with those who depend on others for food.

To Hesiod, a hard working, middle class farmer,<sup>23</sup> losing one’s land represents the ultimate humiliation, forcing one to beg for food. Hesiod uses the imagery of famine and hunger to personify this degradation. For Hesiod, food has become a reward for life lived according to a proper moral code. The diametrical opposite of plenty – famine and hunger – becomes the punishment. Zeus rewards in the form of plenty, and punishes in the form of hunger.

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<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of Hesiod’s socioeconomic status, see Orlando Patterson, *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, especially chapter 3, “The Greek Origins of Freedom” (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).

(WD 299) But do you at any rate, always remembering my charge, work, highborn Perses, that Famine may hate you, and venerable Demeter richly crowned may love you.

(WD 230) [those who honor justice] all-seeing Zeus never decrees cruel war against them. Neither famine nor disaster ever haunt men who do true justice.

(WD 238-243) But for those who practice violence and cruel deeds far-seeing Zeus, the son of Cronos, ordains a punishment. Often even a whole city suffers for a bad man who sins and devises presumptuous deeds, and the son of Cronos lays great trouble upon the people, famine and plague together.

The sharing of food, then, works best in one direction. Offering food is appropriate, as is sharing food at a feast. But seeking food from another represents a *negative* point of contact, a punishment from the gods. This point is emphasized by Hesiod's description of the lazy man. Lazy men envy the wealthy. Wealth, which for Hesiod represents agricultural goods, comes with hard work on the farm. When one has these products, one gains prestige – nobility and honor. And the one who relies on the hard work of others – the lazy man, the drone – envies the one who has an ample supply of food (WD 311). The implication Hesiod makes is that lazy men deserve their fate – to become the working poor or slaves. This suggests that when Hesiod

ignores the needs of the hired hand and the slave, he does so deliberately.

In fact, it is food that characterizes the utopian paradises that Hesiod describes as the Isles of the Blest (WD 225-237). The first utopia is for those who honor justice. Not only does *Dike* keep us from becoming animals and eating each other as he explains in line 277, it also leads to unimaginable rewards. Their city and the people in it flourish (WD 227), Zeus never decrees war against such a city (WD 229), and famine and disaster stay away (WD 230). The earth bears them *bios* – the means for life. Life is so good and the earth is so bountiful, in fact, that there is no need for seafaring, which Hesiod disdains. This image is contrasted with the punishment that Zeus will visit upon those who dishonor *Dike*. Their whole city suffers, and they experience desolation, famine, plague, and infertility (WD 237-247).

Hesiod's second utopia occurs during the summer, in the month of June (WD 582-596). The work of vineyard digging has just been completed and the industrious farmer has time to rest. This image represents a happy, relaxed farmer who has just completed all his necessary work and has some time to sit in the shade and experience true contentedness. Hesiod's image of happiness revolves around food. Hesiod's happy farmer eats cakes of curds, the meat of heifers and kids, and drinks wine. It is notable that, for Hesiod, the happy man eats and drinks the products of agriculture. He is not, for example, shown enjoying himself at parties and engaging in intellectual discourse with his friends, as Plato might have him do. Nor, in spite of Hesiod's expertise at writing poetry, does he

compose, inspired by the Muses, in the quiet of his efficient home. Happiness for Hesiod translates into food and drink.

But food also represents another indirect point of contact. While the happy autonomous farmer eats the meat of heifers and curds, the hired hand receives only a loaf of bread and the slave's rations are not mentioned at all. Like the slaves in the American South, the joy of a successful harvest is reflected in relaxation and plenty for the master, and food from a trough for the animals and slaves.

In dramatic cases, Hesiod uses the imagery of eating to describe inhuman behavior. In this way, inappropriate eating is used to dehumanize mortals, and to indicate that immortal deities are monsters lacking in humane attributes.

Hesiod uses the imagery of wild animals eating each other as a metaphor for an uncivilized way of life. Improper eating habits, in effect, become descriptive of an entire mode of living. *Dike*, however, civilizes and transforms. With it, people can live like those of his first utopia, the Isles of the Blest, enjoying appropriate food, the products of grain-giving earth who bears plenty (WD 225-227). Without it, however, humans become like wild animals who have no concept of justice (WD 276-278). "... as for fish, and wild animals, and flying birds, they feed on each other, since there is no idea of justice among them, but to men he gave *dike*." With *dike*, even animals can be civilized. The oxen, mules, and dogs of the farm are fed with more appropriate foods, hay. Even the dog, whom Hesiod cautions the reader to feed, is given *siton*, a term that describes the food that humans eat. Tame dogs do not eat other dogs. *Dike*, then, civilizes not just humans but the animals with which we come into contact.

Hesiod compares humans with bad habits to animals. He compares the lazy man, for example, to drones who live off the products of the hard-working honeybees. To emphasize his point, he states that gods dislike laziness as well as men. He calls special attention to two groups of people using eating imagery – bribe-eating barons and bad wives. A bad wife eats a man whole (WS 701), and Hesiod refers to the barons throughout the *Works and Days* “bribe eating princes” (WD 39, 220, 264). Both groups of people are represented as somehow less than human. Their behavior takes them out of the civilized human society, and it is through the imagery of eating that Hesiod makes that point.

Hesiod also uses the imagery of eating to amplify evil. The effect of this use is to make the evil seem all the more real and frightening. In his fable for the princes (WD 201-212), the hawk is very real to the reader. With the nighingale in his grasp, he informs her that he is almighty, and if he so chooses will eat her for dinner. The hawk does not simply state that he might choose to kill or maim the bird, but makes it clear that he is in command, and has the ability to abuse his power.

The monsters of the *Theogony* become more frightening when Hesiod tells us that they eat flesh. Echidna, half nymph and half snake, is great and terrible – that description alone makes her frightening – but she also eats raw flesh. Her antisocial behavior transforms her into an even greater monster (Theo 297). Cerberus fawns on all those he meets going into Hades, but if they try to leave, he lies in wait for them & eats them up when he catches any going back (Theo 770).

Cronos swallows down all his children. The imagery of the great Cronos, who in an earlier passage saved his mother from the monstrous behavior of Ouranos by castrating him and allowing his brothers and sisters to be born, becomes as monstrous as his father, and it takes Zeus to save Cronos' children. Finally, when Zeus swallows down Metis, Hesiod reminds the reader that even the Father of Gods and Men has a dark side.

### *Agriculture in Hesiod*

Agriculture is the great civilizer of humankind. Agriculturalists have historically been represented as civilized, tame, and peaceful. The pastoral agrarian life is idealized by Greek and Roman poets alike. And bread, one of the most ubiquitous products of agriculture, is frequently considered a marker of the civilized life. This is clearly represented by Hesiod, particularly in WD 109-200, where he describes the five ages of humankind. Two of the ages are 'good', and Hesiod speaks wistfully about them. The remaining three are 'bad.' Those who are members of the good races are described as agriculturalists, and the fact that they eat bread is implicit. The earth senses their goodness and yields harvest with little or no work on their part. The bad races, on the other hand, neither eat bread nor practice agriculture.

### **Golden Age (WD 109-120)**

In the beginning, the immortals who have their homes on Olympus created the golden generations of mortal people. These lived in Cronos' time, when he was the king in heaven.

They lived as if they were gods, their hearts free from all sorrow, by themselves, and without hard work or pain; no miserable old age came their way; their hand, their feet, did not alter. *They took their pleasure in festivals*, and lived without troubles. When they died, it was as if they fell asleep. All goods were theirs. *The fruitful grainland yielded its harvest to them of its own accord*; this was great and abundant, while they at their pleasure quietly looked after their works, in the midst of good things.<sup>24</sup>

*They lived as if they were gods.*

Without old age and hard work, they were like gods indeed. The hard work Hesiod refers to must mean agricultural work, but the next few lines indicate that there was no need for that for the people of the Golden Age.

*They took their pleasure in festivals.*

According to Walter Burkert, “The natural and straightforward aim of a festival is feasting – eating and drinking. In Greek sacral practice this element is always present.”<sup>25</sup> The procession, or *pompe*, frequently includes bearers of water and bread, and always includes the sacrificial animals.<sup>26</sup> The festival, then, prepares to celebrate and partake of the bounty of agriculture. This

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<sup>24</sup> Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Works and Days, Theogony; The Shield of Herakles* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 107.

<sup>26</sup> Burkert, 99.



would normally include bread, wine, and the meat of livestock. The people of the Golden Age, then, were a civilized people enjoying the fruits of the civilized, agricultural life, without the wildness and unrestrained passions that characterize the people of the lesser ages. That Hesiod describes them as “good and blessed spirits ... they watch over mortal men and defend them from evil; they watch over lawsuits and hard dealings ... they bestow wealth” (WD 121-126) reinforces their link to all that is civilized.

*The fruitful grainland yielded its harvest to them of its own accord.*

Grains are the staple foods of agricultural communities. The grainlands of the Golden Age, however, require no time-consuming field preparation, or even, presumably, the sowing and care, that wears down farmers. The people of Cronos’ time, therefore, had time to do whatever they wished, likening them to gods indeed. That they were free from sorrow and had no hard work or pain can be linked directly to the self-yielding grainlands.

### **Silver Age (WD 127-139)**

Next after these the dwellers upon Olympos created a second generation, of silver, far worse than the other. They were not like the golden ones either in shape or spirit. A child was a child for a hundred years, looked after and playing by his gracious mother, kept at home, a complete booby. But when it came time for them to grow up and gain full measure, they lived for only a poor short time; by their own

foolishness they had troubles, for they were not able to keep away from reckless crime against each other, *nor would they worship the gods, nor do sacrifice on the sacred altars of the blessed ones*, which is the right thing among the customs of men, and therefore Zeus, son of *Cronos*, in anger engulfed them, for they paid no due honors to the blessed gods who live on Olympos.<sup>27</sup>

Perpetually children, the people of the Silver Age never learned how to take care of themselves, and, presumably worse, did not worship the gods. There is no mention of grain lands or the works of agriculture, and the people of the Silver Age did not seem to have works. They died from their own foolishness. Their failure to sacrifice to the gods causes their demise. Without the first fruits of agriculture, which include bread, water, other foods, and consecrated livestock, the gods, from whom all these things come, become enraged and Zeus destroys them.

Hesiod emphasizes that the people of the Silver Age are worse than those of the Golden Age, and the absence of a reference to bread or grain lands is telling. That they did not know how to “keep away from reckless crime against each other” and “by their own foolishness they had troubles” seems to suggest that they did not cultivate crops or practice agriculture of any sort. This is further implied by the fact that “they lived for only a short time.” While Hesiod does not suggest that they died from starvation in particular, he does imply that they got into trouble that

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<sup>27</sup> Lattimore translation.

might have been avoided if they spent their time in productive works. In spite of their failings, and even though Zeus destroyed these people in a fit of rage, they nevertheless continue to exist as “blessed spirits” and watch over humankind. And in spite of the fact that they themselves failed to honor the gods, they still deserve their “due honor”.

### **Bronze Age (WD 140-155)**

They were not like the generation of silver. They came from ash spears. They were terrible and strong, and the ghastly action of Ares was theirs, and violence. *They ate no bread*, but maintained an indomitable and adamant spirit. None could come near them; their strength was big, and from their shoulders the arms grew irresistible on their ponderous bodies. The weapons of these men were bronze, of bronze their houses, and they worked as bronzesmiths. There was not yet any black iron. Yet even these, destroyed beneath the hands of each other, went down into the moldering domain of cold Hades, nameless, for all they were formidable black death seized them.<sup>28</sup>

Violence characterizes the Bronze Age. Everything about them indicates war and devastation, from their origins (*They came from ash spears*) to their actions (*the ghastly action of Ares was theirs*) to their weapons, their homes, and their occupations, bronze all. And just as war

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<sup>28</sup> Lattimore translation.

characterized their lives, it was violence too that resulted in their deaths.

*They ate no bread.*

Hesiod emphasizes this fact about the Bronze Age peoples. He does not say what they did eat, but the absence of bread is worthy of his attention. Verdenius, in his commentary on Hesiod, suggests that this statement indicates their uncivilized nature.<sup>29</sup> Bread, long considered a sign of a settled, peaceful, agricultural life, is not in the reality of those of the Bronze Age. Their failure to eat it indicates that they did not grow grain. Indeed, there is no mention of grainlands anywhere in Hesiod's description of their existence. There is only war and violence. They did not eat bread because they did not have grainlands, and they did not practice agriculture because they were too full of violence. When one compares the people of the Bronze Age with those of Hesiod's utopias, it becomes clear that these people are the very ones Zeus punishes for dishonoring *dike*. Eating bread, then, becomes more than a metaphor for a civilized, peaceful people. Failure to do so suggests warlike, uncivilized behavior, one deserving of the penalty Zeus will ordain for them.

### **Age of Heroes (WD 156-170)**

Now when the earth had gathered over this generation also, Zeus, son of Cronos, created

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<sup>29</sup> W.J. Verdenius, *Commentary on Hesiod: Works and Days*, vv. 1-382 (Leiden: E.J.Brill Academic Publishers, 1985).

yet another fourth generation on the fertile earth, *and these were better and nobler*, the wonderful generation of hero-men, who are also called half-gods, the generation before our own on this vast earth. But of these too, evil war and carnage took some; some by seven-gated Thebes in the land of Kadmos *as they fought over the flocks of Oidipous*; others war had taken in ships over the great gulf of the sea, where they also fought for the sake of lovely-haired Helen. There, for these, the end of death was misted about them. But on others Zeus, son of Cronos, settled a living and a country of their own, apart from human kind, at the end of the world. And there they have their dwelling place, and hearts free of sorrow in the islands of the blessed by the deep-swirling stream of the ocean, prospering heroes, *on whom in every year three times over the fruitful grainland bestows its sweet yield.*<sup>30</sup>

*And these were better and nobler.*

The people of the Age of Heroes were better than those of Hesiod's time, and also of the Bronze and Silver Age peoples. In some ways, they were comparable to those of the Golden Age, for, even though they took part in war, theirs were honorable wars such as in Thebes and in the Trojan War.

*On whom in every year three times over the fruitful grain land bestows its sweet yield.*

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<sup>30</sup> Lattimore translation.

Like the people of the Golden Age, the grain land produces an abundant reward for the heroes – an appropriate one since Hesiod indicates very clearly that these heroes valued civilized life: “They fought over the flocks of Oidipous.” While they still presumably had to work for their produce, the earth yields three times its harvest for them, a powerful indication of the gods’ approval. And without the hard work that tires and causes one to age, the Heroes too were godlike, even more like those of the Golden Age.

### **Iron Age (WD 170-200)**

After this, Zeus of the wide brows established yet one more generation of men, the fifth, *to be on the fertile earth*. And I wish that I were not any part of the fifth generation of men, but had died before it came, or been born afterward. For here now is the age of iron. Never by daytime will there be an end to hard work and pain, nor in the night to weariness, when the gods will send anxieties to trouble us. *Yet here also there shall be some good things mixed with the evils.*

*... to be on the fertile earth*

A hint, albeit vague, that the earth will produce a harvest even though it will come at the expense of endless “hard work and pain.”

*Yet here also there shall be some good things*

The people of Hesiod's age, even though flawed, still know how to honor the gods, and still understand agriculture. So the utopias are possible, even if rare.

### **Conclusion**

Hesiod's use of food and eating in the *Works & Days* and the *Theogony* illustrates clearly that food and eating meant more to him and to his contemporaries than meets the eye. They point directly to our humanity and serve to indicate an established hierarchy. Our wildest dreams and our most frightening nightmares revolve around food and eating. Furthermore, food and the language of civilized humanity are not unique to Hesiod. It can be seen in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in Plato and Aristotle, and even in modern times. Food translates into control. Whoever has food possesses control of life over death.

Hesiod shows us that food can be an effective weapon to demoralize and dehumanize, something that the slave owners of the American South knew well. Literature, democracy, philosophy, art, and architecture are among the great gifts of the Classical world to modern culture. So too are efficient means of oppression.

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