

## **Divine Retribution in Hesiod's *Theogony***

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to discuss the question of divine retribution in *Theogony*, a Greek poem attributed to Hesiod (8th c. B.C.) It shows that divine retribution occurs in the wake of crimes, which brings about gods' wrath in Greek mythology. Then it proceeds to reveal this poet's major purpose which consists in his conception of poetry as an educative tool, which reminds us of its time-honoured role as a public forum geared towards inculcating ethical values into its recipients.

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The subject of homicide has always exercised the minds of many great poets, dramatists, historians, and philosophers who mainly emphasize the inevitability of divine retribution that follows sooner or later, as well as its presentation as a deterrent against committing murder.<sup>1</sup> A proper approach to this subject would be to look at the presentation of homicide in Greek mythology. As a cultural heritage, “myths always reflect the society that produces them. They cannot be separated from the physical, social, and spiritual worlds in which a people lives, or from a people’s history.”<sup>2</sup>

Hesiod, the Greek eighth-century BC poet, records the first murder in Greek mythology in his poem *Theogony* (Ca. 750-700 BC) which consists of an account of the origin of the cosmos, the genealogies of the gods, and the events which led to Zeus whose rule is greatly eulogized.<sup>3</sup> Uranos, the great Sky-god loathed some of his ‘most fearsome’ offspring, the Cyclopes or Kyklopes (giants with only one circular eye in the middle of the forehead) and the Hecatonchires (giants with a hundred arms darting from their shoulders and fifty heads); so he forced them back into the womb of their mother Gaia, the Earth goddess. (*Theogony*, 139-160)<sup>4</sup> Gaia’s suffering as a bereaved mother (which is summed up in Hesiod’s laconic assertion that while Uranos “took pleasure in the wicked work”, she “groaned”) suggests her divine pity for her imprisoned children as well as her divine wrath over her husband’s maltreatment of their children. (*Theogony*, 160-1) Gaia’s pain prompts her to devise, propose and arrange the castration of her husband. The act of castration, as Andrew Lang first indicated, “represents that separation of heaven and

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<sup>1</sup> Among classical Greek historians we may note Herodotus (ca. 484-420 BC ), *Histories*, translated into English by A.D. Godley (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1921). For Socrates’s, Plato’s and Aristotle’s views, see Ernest Barker, *The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle* ( Russell & Russell Inc., New York, 1959). For English Renaissance historiographers, see E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Play* (Chatto and Windus London, 1944), and Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare’s Histories: Mirrors of Elizabeth Policy* ( The Huntington Library, California, 1947).

<sup>2</sup> Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth* ( Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1998), p.21.

<sup>3</sup> For the date of Hesiod’s *Theogony*, see Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth*, p.670.

<sup>4</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, translated into English and edited by M.L West (Oxford University Press, 1988). All citations are from this edition unless otherwise mentioned.

earth which is a frequent motif in mythology all over the world.”<sup>5</sup> Despite Hesiod’s laconic presentation of the character’s inner lives, he highlights Gaia’s motives in her address to her other children when she incites them to “get redress for [their] father’s cruelty”. “After all”, she goes on to assert, “he began it by his ugly behavior”. (*Theogony*, 166) In his edition of *Theogony*, M.L. West glosses Gaia’s words as follows: “an almost juristic use, meaning not so much ‘he did it before you did’ as ‘he did it when you had done nothing’, ‘he started it’.”<sup>6</sup> But Gaia’s juristic attempt to present herself and her children as agents of divine retaliation fails to convince her children at first. Her children, so Hesiod writes, “were all seized by fear, and none of them uttered a word.” (*Theogony*, 167). This awed silence externalizes their revulsion against patricide or homicide in general. Kronos’s later readiness to castrate his father is couched in terms, which echo in thought and language Gaia’s words. (*Theogony*, 170-2) Kronos’s use of the same juristic idiom reveals his conception of himself as an agent of divine retribution, an image which materializes when he carries the adamantine sickle prepared by his mother.

The emasculation of Uranos greatly develops the theme of divine vengeance. His spattered blood was all received by Gaia who later bore “the powerful Erinyes”, or the Furies, “the goddesses of retribution who exact punishment for murder”. (*Theogony*, 185 and below) Also, in his denunciation of his children’s “wickedness”, for which he renames them as “Titans”, the dying Uranos threatens retribution. (*Theogony*, 210-1) Uranos’s threat takes the form of a prophecy that Kronos is “fated ... to be defeated by his own child”, a prophecy endorsed by Gaia. (*Theogony*, 462-3) This prophecy shows the inevitability of the divine retribution, which will be visited upon Kronos despite all his power.

Kronos seems to have been fully aware of the unavailability of his prophesied fate because it has always haunted him, as Hesiod remarks:

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<sup>5</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, edited with Prolegomena and Commentary by M.L. West (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1966), p.19.

<sup>6</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, edited by West, l. 166 and below, p.216.

So he [i.e.-Kronos] kept no blind man's watch, but observed and swallowed his children, as each of them reached their mother's knees from her holy womb. (*Theogony*, 460-464)

Thus, we note that Kronos's conception of himself as an agent of divine justice has failed to solace him or bring him any peace of mind. Kronos's anxious wakefulness, if dramatized, would be no less exciting than that of the Shakespearean Richard III who was fated to be defeated by Richmond, Henry VII-to-be.

Kronos's rule (known as the Golden Age when men lived like gods, without toil, suffering or even old age, feasted constantly because the earth produced an abundance of food for them, and above all cherished honor and right without the compulsion of laws or fear of punishment) does not seem to have appeased the wrath of Gaia and Uranos who seem to be at the helm of the divine universe of Hesiod's *Theogony*.<sup>7</sup> As deities, Gaia and Uranos immediately respond to Rhea's entreaties that she should bear her new baby [i.e.-Zeus] in secrecy and that Kronos should pay for her father's furies and those of the children he had been swallowing. (*Theogony*, 471-3) Gaia's and Uranos's response to their daughter's supplications and their offer of assistance show their divine pity and wrath; pity for the innocent children and wrath over the cannibalistic Kronos.

Rhea follows her mother's advice. She goes to Crete where she bears Zeus, who is immediately entrusted to Gaia and hidden in a cave until he is grown up. Then Gaia cunningly wraps a large stone in baby-cloth, which Kronos instantly gulps down, thinking that it is his newborn baby. Thus, despite his reputation for deviousness and scheming, Kronos's gullibility emphasizes Gaia's divine power and the fulfillment of the prophecy about his downfall when the due time comes round. (*Theogony*, 170,471-496) And in due course, Kronos is deceived into disgorging his children by the stratagems of Gaia and the skills and strength of Zeus. (*Theogony*, 492-500)

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<sup>7</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, edited by West, p.40. See also, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by David R. Slavitt, Book One, 88-92.

Close inspection reveals that Zeus's overthrow of his father does not imply his immediate succession as the father of gods and men because he seeks Gaia's advice on more than one occasion. During the Titanomachy, (i.e. the battle where the Titans attack Zeus and his brothers who fight on Mount Olympus, which overtopped the Pierian mountain range of Thessaly and indeed was the loftiest spot on earth and hence a symbol of eternity) Zeus seeks Gaia who prophesies that he will win victory if he releases the Cyclopes.<sup>8</sup> So, Zeus releases them from their baneful bondage in Tartarus, the place of punishment in the underworld. In gratitude, the Cyclopes give Zeus thunder, lightning and the thunderbolt which "mighty earth" [i.e. Gaia] had kept hidden up to them." (*Theogony*, 502) Also, on Gaia's advice, Zeus sets free the hundred-handers with whose aid he overcomes the Titans. Zeus hurls his titanic enemies with his father in their midst into the "misty gloom" of Tartarus, whose gates will be guarded by the hundred-handers, his "trustworthy" and "renowned allies." (*Theogony*, 731-734,846)

Zeus's expulsion of his father and the other Titans into Tartarus emerges as the working out of Uranos's curse when he threatened vengeance amid his death throes. This idea tallies well with *Theogony's* overall system of divine justice. At first blush, the fall of Uranos and that of Kronos seem to be part of the succession myth, which is said to form the backbone of *Theogony*.<sup>9</sup> But, at bottom, the succession cycle emerges as manifestation of the working out of retributive justice. This idea seems to be suggested by Gaia and Uranos who advise Zeus to swallow his first wife, Metis, when she was pregnant with Athena. For from Metis, as Gaia and Uranos prophesy, "it was destined that ... she was to bear, king of gods and men, one proud of heart" (*Theogony*, 896-7) Thus in their oracular capacities Gaia and Uranos forestall the birth of that dangerously bold son who would have deposed his father because the succession process has not been a smooth transfer of power, as we have already seen.

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<sup>8</sup> See Richmond Y. Hathorn, *Greek Mythology* (American University of Beirut, 1977) p. 12 and James Adam, *The Religious Teachers of Greece* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988) , p.32.

<sup>9</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, edited by West p.18.

One important question arises here: Is the (averted) prophecy about Zeus's deposition at the hands of his unborn son a curse uttered by the overthrown Kronos who in his turn fell because of his father's similar curse? This question gives rise to another query: "If this prophecy is a curse, does this indicate that Zeus incurs Gaia's divine wrath over his maltreatment of his father?" Before launching into these questions, let us see what Hesiod says after Zeus's victory over his father with his Titans. In *Theogony* we learn that just before Zeus's official accession as King, his rule is challenged by Typhoeus/Typhaon, Gaia's offspring after her sexual union with Tartarus. (*Theogony*, 821-22) Typhoeus, Zeus's worst antagonist, has on his shoulders one hundred snake heads that breathe fire and imitate every conceivable kind of noise. (*Theogony*, 823-35)

Gaia's birth to a pretender to Zeus's throne has been a vexing question for critics mainly because her action is not accounted for by Hesiod and is at variance with her benevolence towards Zeus in the rest of *Theogony*.<sup>10</sup> On the Typhonomachy (Zeus's battle against Typhoeus), Timothy Gantz wrote: "The arrival of such a challenger does, however, give Zeus a chance to show off his power when the other gods can do nothing, and this is surely intended by Hesiod, if not Gaia."<sup>11</sup>

In the light of this interpretation, Hesiod and Gaia appear as warmongers. But careful scrutiny of *Theogony* and *Works and Days* shows Hesiod to be a pacifist and a religious teacher who zealously seeks to instill justice and morality in his readers. And when we take into account that *Theogony* is mainly designed as an apotheosis of Zeus of whose exploits his daughters, the Muses, are invoked to sing, we will note that Hesiod is not expected to include any reference to Gaia's wrath over Zeus's banishment of his father to the underworld. Since Hesiod is not much help in this regard, it is advisable to trace Gaia's wrath in other mythographers.

Apollodorus, author of the *Library*, the oldest handbook of Greek myth that survives antiquity (second century A.D.) suggests that Gaia

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<sup>10</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, edited by West, p.381. See also Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1993), p.48.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.49.

bears the Giants because of her wrath over the treatment of the Titans. (*Library*, I,6,1)<sup>12</sup> The Giants, conceived from the blood of Uranos's severed genitals, were a race of huge and powerful beings, with long hair and beards, and snaky legs. They attacked Zeus and the Olympians in the Gigantomachy, the "battle of the Giants", hurling rocks and burning oak trees into the sky. (*Library*, I,6,1) The Giants are defeated when the mortal Heracles, son of Zeus, joins the Olympian gods in the war, for there is a prophecy that the gods cannot slay the Giants without a mortal assistance. The defeat of the Giants was seen as an act of divine justice. Bacchylides, the Greek lyric poet, ca. 518-440 B.C., spoke of the hybrids that destroyed the Giants.<sup>13</sup>

It is to be noted that Heracles's presence indicates that the Gigantomachy was considerably later than the primordial events of the Titanomachy and the Typhonomachy.<sup>14</sup> But within this inquiry into the evolution of divine justice, it is worth tracing Gaia's divine wrath as a goddess. In Apollodorus, Gaia's anger over the death of her offspring, the Giants, precipitates the birth of Typhoeus after her union with Tartarus, as in Hesiod, as we have already seen. (*Library*, I,6,3) Here, Typhoeus hurls fiery rocks at heaven, hoots and spouts fire from his mouths. Upon seeing him rushing at heaven, Zeus and the other gods flee to Egypt where they disguise themselves as various animals. Zeus pelts Typhoeus at a distance with thunderbolts, and at close quarters strikes him down with an adamantine sickle. Then the monster flees to Mount Casius in north Syria, where Zeus throws down the sickle and grapples with him hand to hand. Typhoeus catches Zeus in his coils, wrests the sickle away, and cuts out the sinews from Zeus's hands and feet, which he hides in a jar. Having rendered the god helpless, the monster carries him to a cave in Cilicia. Only when Zeus's son Hermes and Aegipan, a woodland god, have stolen the sinews back by the Fates, Zeus's daughters, into eating fruit that will bring about his defeat. (*Library*, I,6.2-3)

<sup>12</sup> Apollodorus, *The Library*, translated into English by Sir James George Frazer (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1921).

<sup>13</sup> Bacchylides, *Complete Poems*, translated by Robert Fagles and edited by Adam M. Parry (Yale University Press, 1961) Dithyramb, 15, p.48.

<sup>14</sup> Powell, p. 95.

Had Zeus been given a chance to ponder upon his sufferings in that cave, he would have thought of his violence against his father. But Hesiod does not mention Zeus's agony at the hands of that monster because this will be offensive to contemporary religious feeling, which regards Zeus as invincible.<sup>15</sup> And it is in view of Zeus's unmentioned regret about his maltreatment of his father that we can best appreciate their reconciliation, which could have appeased Gaia. In *Works and Days* Hesiod allows Kronos to rule in the "Isles of the Blessed Ones". (169-70) And as we have already seen, Hesiod associates Kronos with the Golden Age where men led a blissful life and of their own accord cherished honour and justice. Also, in Pindar, the Greek poet, ca. 518-440 B.C., there is a reference to Kronos's rule in the "Islands of the Blest", a blissful world abundant in golden flowers growing on trees and soft ocean-breeze blowing around.<sup>16</sup> These utopian isles are akin to the city of justice which almost all moralistic writers have always sought to establish.

Within this investigation into the workings of retributive justice, the use of the adamantine sickle assumes pivotal significance. Barry B. Powell suggests that the sickle, which Zeus carries in the Typhonomachy, could have been the one with which Kronos had castrated his father, Uranos.<sup>17</sup> If we accept this suggestion, we would then note that this sickle appears as a weapon of divine justice because it was made by Gaia in the wake of her wrath over her husband's maltreatment of their children. And it is in terms of this idea of the sickle as a weapon of divine vengeance that we can properly appreciate its use by Zeus in his war against Typhoeus. But here the monster seizes the sickle with which he slices out the sinews of Zeus's hands and feet. And if we accept Goettling's ingenious interpretation of Hesiod's line "When Zeus had accumulated his strength ..." (*Theogony*, 853) as an allusion to this punishment which Typhoeus inflicts upon Zeus, we would then note that what this god suffered emerges as a divine chastisement for his violence against his

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<sup>15</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, edited by West, p. 401.

<sup>16</sup> *The Odes of Pindar*, translated into English and edited by Sir John Sandys (Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1915), *Olympian II*, 71-3, *Pythian IV*, 290-2.

<sup>17</sup> Powell, p.94.



father.<sup>18</sup> Hence, we would realize that before he takes up his office as the king of gods and men, Zeus feels that he is unable to escape the payment demanded by his father's erinyes. But the presentation of Kronos as ruler in the Isles of the Blest subtly suggests that Zeus released him. This action seems to have appeased the erinyes and Gaia to whose wraths Hesiod does not refer as this would be offensive to his day's religious feeling which regarded Zeus as the guardian of justice and right. After the Tyhphonomachy, Gaia once again appears in her oracular capacity. "On [Gaia's] advice", Hesiod writes, the "Olympian Zeus the wide seeing" is elected "King and lord of the immortals". (*Theogony*, 881-2) The elected king immediately proceeds to divide the sovereignty over the universe with his brothers by lot. Zeus is allotted heaven, Poseidon the sea and Hades the underworld. Zeus's reception of the sky to rule is not a stroke of good luck. It is part and parcel of Gaia's oracular vision, which she has just displayed when she recommends the election of Zeus as Lord of the gods. On Zeus's apportionment of privileges with his brothers, Michael Simpson wrote: "The method of the lot used in the division was very "political", the lot being a device as important as elections for making choices in fifth century B.C. democratic Athens".<sup>19</sup> Zeus's recourse to the method of the lot asserts its pertinence as a preliminary step towards establishing a new world order, one based upon the principles of right and justice. Zeus's programme of reorganizing privileges during his regime marks the end of the world of the Older Gods (i.e. Kronos and the Titans) and ushers in the Olympian era which in its turn brings the cycle of succession to completion.

Zeus consolidates his regime by undertaking a series of marriages. When carefully considered, these marriages appear to be allegories illuminating the nature of Zeus and the universe.<sup>20</sup> Zeus's marriage with the Titaness Themis, for instance, is highly allegorical because her name personifies 'law' and 'order', that is, all that's right and proper in nature and society.<sup>21</sup> Hence, "Zeus's union with her explains

<sup>18</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, edited by West, p. 391.

<sup>19</sup> *Gods and Heroes of the Greeks: The Library of Apollodorus*, translated into English and edited by Michael Simpson (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1976), p.23.

<sup>20</sup> Powell, p.143.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 143. See also Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, edited by West, p.71.

allegorically that under Zeus's reign law, not force and whim govern the universe".<sup>22</sup> The allegorical character of this marriage is enforced by the appellations and functions of their offspring. Their first set of daughters, the Horae, 'seasons', are introduced as the Watchers-Eunomia (Lawfulness, lawful government), Dike (Justice) and Eirene (flourishing Peace) "who watch over the works of mortal men". (*Theogony*, 901-2)<sup>23</sup> As goddesses of seasonal ripeness and growth, they protect men's cultivated land whose prosperity depends primarily on peace and just administration.<sup>24</sup> In Pindar, the Horae and their mother Themis, the goddess of universal right, are honoured as civic virtues because they bless cities with good fortune.<sup>25</sup> "Prosperous Corinth" is celebrated as the "city of glorious children":

For there dwells Order with her sister Justice,  
firm foundation of cities,  
and Peace, steward of wealth for men,  
Who was raised with them

the golden daughter of wise counseling Themis. (*Olympian*, 13, 4-8)<sup>26</sup>

Bacchylides regards the civic virtues personified by Themis and the Horae as the codes of proper conduct, which lead to prosperity. "Zeus, / the ruler on high who sees all things", the poet asserts,

is not to blame for the great anguish of mortals.

Every man has it within his power  
to emulate unswerving Justice,  
who keeps the door to the hall of the holy Eunomia

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<sup>22</sup> Powell, p.143.

<sup>23</sup> Gantz, p.53.

<sup>24</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, edited by West, p.406.

<sup>25</sup> Pindar, *Olympian Odes and Pythian Odes*, edited and translated into English by William H. Race (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1997), *Olympian* 8, 2-5, p.139.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p.189.

and prudent Themis, goddess of good order.

Those who dwell with Justice thrive

and their children prosper. (*Dithyramb I*)<sup>27</sup>

Themis's other set of daughters is also allegorical. They are called the Moirai, 'Fates' who spin the threads of destiny. Clotho is the Spinner, who makes the thread, Lachesis the Apportioner, who measures it, and Atropos (the Unavoidable), who cuts it off. (*Theogony*, 904)<sup>28</sup> Hesiod's reference to the Fates as daughters of Zeus and Themis has caused some confusion because these goddesses have already been catalogued as Night's daughters. (*Theogony*, 217-19) For M.L. West, the reappearance of the Moriai as daughters of Zeus and Themis is "an inconsistency, but not a very serious one".<sup>29</sup> Timothy Gantz does not see this as an inconsistency. Hesiod's reintroduction of the Fates, Gantz rightly argues, "revises their genealogy in accordance with the new order and makes them the offspring of Themis and Zeus, who is the source of their power".<sup>30</sup> Gantz's argument fits well within Zeus's initiatory reorganization of privileges in his regime. Zeus perpetuates the Moirai's existing functions, which consist in giving good and evil to men at their birth. But he places them under his control. These "Moirai", West argues, "are subordinate to Zeus; not only are they his daughters, but he gives them their [power]".<sup>31</sup> Here the Moirai are different from their earlier chthonian counterparts, daughters of Night. Those dark goddesses have been introduced as "the mercilessly punishing [Fates] who prosecute the transgressions of men and the gods [and] never ...cease from their terrible wrath until they have paid the sinner his due". (*Theogony*, 217-223) Even their sister, "Resentment" or "Nemesis" is "an affliction for mortal men" (*Theogony*, 223). The replacement of Night's Fates by those produced by Themis and Zeus marks the end of the religious system of the Older Gods. Unlike Night, which is introduced as a "baleful" goddess who bore the "dark" and "hateful" Fates and Nemesis. Themis is

<sup>27</sup> *Epinician Odes and Dithyrambs of Bacchylides*, translated into English by David R. Slavitt (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1998), p.68-9.

<sup>28</sup> Powell, p. 144. See also Gantz, p.7.

<sup>29</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, edited by West, p.229.

<sup>30</sup> Gantz, p.7.

<sup>31</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, edited by West, p.408.

introduced as a “shining” goddess of universal order and right whose benevolent daughters bless men and cities with prosperity. (*Theogony*, 213,223)<sup>32</sup> And as the offspring of Themis and Zeus, the new Moirai execute their functions in accordance with their father's long-range plans of justice.

A look at the Olympian pantheon reveals that under Zeus's reign his sons and daughters perform their own public functions, which contribute to their father's vision of retribution and justice. Minos and Rhadamanthys, Zeus's sons by Europa, daughter of the Phoenician King Agenor or of his son Phoenix, were famous as upholders of justice. In Homer's *Iliad*, Minos is described as “a watcher over Crete”, where he passed laws and reigned (13.450)<sup>33</sup> After his death Minos becomes a judge who holds “a golden scepter” and issues judgments among the dead”. (*Odyssey*, 11.568-71)<sup>34</sup> “Godlike Rhadamanthys” serves as a judge in the Elysian Fields (or Elysium), a remote part of the earth, where the virtuous are rewarded with the “easiest life”, a life akin to that on the Isles of the Blessed. (*Odyssey*, 4.563-8) Also, in Pindar, Rhadamanthys is known for his just counsels. (*Olympian*, 2,75)

Aiakos, Zeus's son by the nymph Aegina, daughter of Aspos, god of a Beotoian river, established his fame for settling disputes. “Divine Aiakos”, Pindar says, “settled disputes even for the gods”. (*Isthmian*, 8, 24-26) And according to Plato's *Gorgias* (524a) Aiakos is a judge in the Underworld along with Minos and Rhadamanthys.

In view of this analysis we note that Hesiod's *Theogony* is mainly a didactic work intended to inculcate religious and moral principles in its readers. Hesiod's preoccupation with the issue of retribution and justice stresses the time-honoured role of poetry as a public forum for disseminating ethical values, a role emphasized in the above-quoted poetic excerpts on justice .

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<sup>32</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days, Theogony and The Shield of Herakles*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1968), *Theogony*, 902.

<sup>33</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, translated into English by A.T. Murray, revised by William F. Wyatt and edited by G.P. Goold (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., New York, 1967).

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