

HESIOD, WORKS AND DAYS, ca. 735-700 BCE

A contemporary of Homer, the Greek author Hesiod produced his two major works, Theogony (a genealogical account of the gods) and Works and Days, around the last third of the eighth century BCE. Works and Days is part letter to his brother Perses, part advice column, and part abstract musing on human righteousness. According to Hesiod, the current Sixth Age of Man, the "race of iron," is consigned to labor; yet this labor is the key to success and happiness. Accordingly, Hesiod provides snippets of advice, from farming to the choice of a proper wife.

Now, listen closely. If you wish, I will tell you another tale and tell it well about how the gods and mankind share the same origin. The race of men made by the Immortals on high Olympus was made of gold. Kronos then ruled in heaven, and mankind lived like gods themselves, free of worry, toil, and sorrow. The misery of age did not afflict them; from head to foot, they delighted in feasts, knew no pains, and died simply by falling asleep.

They lacked for nothing. The fertile earth brought forth its fruits in plenty, without any labor on their part; they had only the delight of harvesting as they pleased, happy in their bounty. Since that time, when the Earth closed over that race, they have lived on as spirits, by Zeus' design, to watch over mortal men and bestow them with blessings.

Such has been Zeus' reward to them. Next came the race of silver to live on high Olympus, a lesser race, sharing neither shape nor spirit with those of before. Their sons lived with their mothers for a hundred years, playing childish games, but when the years passed and they reached the age of young manhood, then their lives were full of pain and were cut short on account of their simple-mindedness.

They could not resist doing harm to one another; they refused to serve the Immortals and to make sacrifices on the sacred altars of the gods (as is demanded of all peoples everywhere). So, Zeus, the son of Kronos, in rage over their refusal to honor the deities on Olympus did away with them. The earth closed over them, since which time they are called the Mortal Blessed below. They have their honor but are of second rank.

Then Father Zeus created a third race of men out of bronze -nothing like the silver one created them out of ash trees. Terrible and savage, besotted with the baleful work of Ares, a violent race. They did not till the land, their hearts being too stubborn. They were ungainly giants, great in strength, with powerful arms reaching out from mighty shoulders and torsos. They had bronze armor and bronze houses. They worked all manner of things in bronze since they did not know iron. Their own violent ways brought them down, and they passed to cold Hades, leaving no good names behind them. Strong as they were, the black death got the better of them, and they abandoned the light of the sun; over this race, too, the Earth closed. Then Kronos' son, Zeus, placed a fourth race upon the vast and fertile Earth, a dutiful and noble race of the divine heroes called demigods, the predecessors of Man. Brutal war and strife brought them down, some of them below the seven gates of Thebes, in Cadmea, as they contended for Oedipus' inheritance; others sailed over the deep sea to Troy in the war for fair-haired Helen. There, some were swallowed by Death, but Father Zeus, Kronos' son, spared others and set them at far reaches of the Earth, well away from men, where they live in bliss in the Isles of the Blessed near deep-currented Oceanus:

especially blessed are these heroes, for the fertile land they inhabit brings forth its bounty three times a year.

How much better it would be to have died before the fifth race of men or to be born after their passing! Ours is an age of iron, filled with toil and misery that never ceases, day or night. Truly, the gods give our race endless suffering and hardship, even as they sometimes mix some joy into our sorrow. Father Zeus will bring an end to our race, too; the signs will be when we are born with gray hairs, when fathers and children have nothing in common, when neither hosts nor guests will be hospitable, and friendship between brothers will cease. Respect for parents shall end, despite all the warnings of the gods, and the young will rail harshly at their elders and fail to support them at their age. They will rule by force, attacking each other's cities. They will have no respect for truthful men or the righteous and upright. Evil-doers and criminals they shall lift up instead and might shall make right. Villains will lie and deceive, defrauding their betters and breaking sacred oaths.

In their misery, all people will be beset by Envy, the bringer of misfortune and the shaper of hate-filled faces. At that time, truly, Decency and Moral Judgment will quit the Earth, hiding their faces in white robes, and return to High Olympus, abandoning mankind forever and taking refuge with the Immortals. Black suffering shall be mankind's fate, with nothing to help them against evil. If your heart desires wealth, do as I say and work. Work! And work!

"When the daughters of Atlas, the Seven Sisters, rise in the morning sky begin the harvest, but plow the fields again before they set." They remain hidden for forty days and forty nights, and with the turning of the year they reappear, at the time for the sharpening of iron. This is the law of the land, for both those who dwell near the sea and those glens and meadows far from it: if you would have a fertile land, you must be naked when you drive the oxen, naked when you sow, and naked when you reap-or else Demeter's gifts will fail to come in due season and you will know hunger. You will beg for your bread and earn nothing as you have now come to me. But I will give you nothing more. Work, Pers es, you fool! Do the work laid out for you and for all by the gods. If not, your fate will be suffering-Yes, and for your wife and children too! -for your neighbors will hear your pleas and turn away.

It is wiser to marry a girl who lives near you and choose her carefully, or else your neighbors will surely laugh at your foolishness. For there is no blessing greater to a man than a good wife, and no curse worse than a bad one, a scold who needs no hot iron in order to brand her man; be he ever so strong, she will wear him down before his time ...

Now do as I say: do all that you can to avoid becoming the subject of rumor, for a rumor is a terrible burden-easy to pick up but hard to bear and nearly impossible to set down. No rumor ever dies if enough people hear it. In this way, indeed, a rumor is immortal.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What are the causes of toil and misery for people in Hesiod's time?
2. How is work a function of a man's overall reputation in the community?