

The Golden Age

Hesiod: From Works and Days (Greek, 8th century B.C.)

The gods who own Olympus as dwelling-place
Deathless, made first of mortals a Golden Race,
(this was the time when Kronos in heaven dwelt)
and they lived like gods and no sorrow of heart they felt.
Nothing for toil or pitiful age they cared,
But in strength of hand and foot still unimpaired
They feasted gaily, undarkened by sufferings.
They died as if falling asleep; and all good things
Were theirs, for the fruitful earth unstintingly bore
unforced her plenty, and they, amid their store
Enjoyed their landed ease which nothing stirred
Loved by the gods and rich in many of herd.

[as opposed to Hesiod's own time:]

Fifth is the race that I call my own and abhor.
O to die, or be later born, or born before!
This is the Race of Iron. Dark is their plight.
Toil and sorrow is theirs, and by night
The anguish of death and the gods afflict them and kill,
Though there's yet a trifle of good amid manifold ill.

Virgil: From The Fourth Eclogue (Roman, 70-19 B.C.)

Next when now the strength of years has made thee man, even the trader shall quit the sea,
nor shall the ship of pine exchange wares; every land shall bear all fruits. The earth shall not
feel the harrow, nor the vine the pruning-hook; the sturdy ploughman, too, shall now loose
his oxen from the yoke. Wool shall no more learn to counterfeit varied hues, but of himself
the ram in the meadows shall change his fleece, now to sweetly blushing purple, now to
saffron yellow; of its own will shall scarlet clothe the grazing lamb.

Pindar: From Fragments (The Elysian Fields) (Greek, 522?-443 B.C.)

But in sunshine ever fair
Abide the Good, and all their nights and days
An equal splendor wear.
And never as of old with thankless toil
For their poor empty needs they vex the soil,
And plough the watery seas,
But dwelling with the glorious gods in ease
A tearless life they pass
Whose joy on earth it was
To keep their plighted word; but far from these
Torments the rest sustain too dark for human gaze.

Some of them delight themselves with horses and with
wrestling; others with draughts; and with lyres; while
beside them bloometh the fair flower of perfect bliss.
And o'er that lovely land fragrance is ever shed,
While they mingle all manner of incense with the far-
Shining fire on the altars of the gods.

Horace: From Islands of the Blest (Roman, 65-8 B.C.)

Let us seek the fields,
the happy fields and the islands of the blest,
where the earth is not plowed, but yearly it yields the grain,
and the vine is not trimmed, but forever flourishes,
and the branch of the olive never fails to blossom,
and the black fig, ungrafted, adorns its own tree,
honey drips from the hollow oak, from the lofty hills
the light-stepping spring comes splashing down.
There the goats need no orders to come to the milking pails,
and the flock returns gladly with swelling udders,
and the bear does not growl as he circles the sheepfold at evening,
and the earth does not swell up with vipers.
And we shall wonder at greater blessings: the rainy Eastwind
does not wash away crops with a flood of showers,
and the fertile seeds are not scorched in the dried-up clods,
for the heat and cold are controlled by the king of the gods.
No diseases infect the flock, no raging heat
from a star can dry up the herd with drought.
Never did a ship manned by Argive rowers reach here,
nor a shameless Cochian set foot on this soil,
no Phoenician sailors swing their yardarms this way,
nor did the long-suffering crew of Ulysses.

Dracontius: Eden (Christian poet of the late 5th century)

A place there is diffusing rivers four,
With flowers ambrosial decked; where jewelled turf,
Where fragrant herbs abound that never fade,
The fairest garden in this world of God.
There fruit knows naught of season, but the year,
There ever blossoms earth's eternal spring.
Fair vesture clothes the trees, a goodly band;
With leaves and sturdy branches well entwined
A dense-grown wall arises; from each tree
Depends its store, or lies in meadows strewn.
In sun's hot rays it burneth not, by blasts
Is never shaken, or doth whirlwind rage
With fierce-conspiring gales; no ice can quell,
No hailstorm strike, nor under hoary frost
Grow white the fields. But there are breezes calm,
Rising from softer gust by gleaming springs.
Each tree is lightly stirred; by this mild breath
From moving leaves the tranquil show strays.