The Ages of the World

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"For there are new rulers in heaven, and Zeus governs with lawless customs; that which was mighty before he now brings to nothing." (Chorus of Oceanids. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 150).

"Socrates: Why, I think he [Hesiod] means that the golden race was not made of gold, but was good and beautiful. And I regard it as a proof of this that he further says we are the iron race." (Plato, *Cratylus* 398a).

"… fugit irreparabile tempus …" (Virgil, *Georgics* 3.284).

"O Time, thou great devourer, and thou, envious Age, together you destroy all things; and, slowly gnawing with your teeth, you finally consume all things in lingering death!" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.234).

"With thee conversing, I forget all time,
All seasons, and their change; all please alike." (John Milton, *Paradise Lost* IV. 639).

Don Quijote: "Dichosa edad y siglos dichosos aquellos a quien los antiguos pusieron nombre de dorados, y no porque en ellos el oro, que en esta nuestra edad de hierro tanto se estima, se alcanzase en aquella venturosa sin fatiga alguna, sino porque entonces los que en ella vivían ignoraban estas dos palabras de tuyo y mío." (Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, Parte I, Capítulo XI).

Don Quixote: "Happy the age, happy the time, to which the ancients gave the name of golden, not because in that fortunate age the gold so coveted in this our iron one was gained without toil, but because they that lived in it knew not the two words 'mine' and 'thine'!" (Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Part I, Chapter XI).

"The world's great age begins anew,
The golden years return,
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds outworn:
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream." (P. B. Shelley, *Hellas*).

"... More than machinery, we need humanity, more than cleverness, we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent, and all will be lost ..." (The barber in Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, 1940).

Brief presentation

In this article, the term "Ages of the World" refers to the phases into which tradition has divided the past of the human race (such as "The Golden Age" or "The Iron Age"), whereas by the expression "Ages of Man" the phases of individual life (such as "Childhood" and "Old Age") are meant. In ancient sources, the myth of the ages refers to the Ages of the World, and not to the phases of individual life, although tradition has wished to discern a similar cyclical pattern in both, as well as in other realities such as the hours of the day, the phases of the moon, the seasons of the year, or the alternations of the four elements.

The "Ages of the World" have no relation with the divisions of the past into periods made afterwards by geology or history. In myth, there is neither "precambrian" nor "pleistocene" nor "paleolithic" [1], since myth addresses issues in ways different from those of natural science or history. The "Ages of the World" have neither been philosophically demonstrated nor have they been object of religious dogma. Rather their "prophets" have been poets, artists, and other visionaries, in whose accounts atoms of all other disciplines may be found. They did not create the myth, but the myth created them, or so they claim.

The more systematic sources for the myth of the Ages of the World are the accounts of Hesiod and Ovid. The Races of Hesiod are five, and the Ages of Ovid are, in principle, four, but some details in Ovid's texts allow for more than four ages. In any case, the metaphor of the four metals mentioned by Hesiod (Gold, Silver, Bronze, and Iron) is also used by Ovid in the continuous part of his description of the ages of the world (*Metamorphoses* 1.89–150) which thus may be said to total four.

As H. C. Baldry has remarked, Hesiod (c. 750 BC), who is the first extant source for this myth, referred to "Races", not to "Ages". It was posterity that introduced the latter term. Yet this modification did not alter the core of the idea: different Races lived in succeeding times, each reflecting a certain *Zeitgeist*, which is the bringer or bearer of their customs and spiritual qualities.

The Ages (or Races) are mainly defined by moral or spiritual qualities which are seen as degenerating in the course of time. Thus the first age (the Golden) is an era of peace, justice, simplicity, and happiness. But the succeeding Races, being spiritually inferior, cause both the world and the life of man to increasingly fall under the rule of hate, greed, war, and injustice. In this context, material progress—for example, the conquests of navigation—is not counted as an improvement, but rather as a symptom, if not a cause, of decline.

Accordingly, the sequence Gold–Silver–Bronze–Iron illustrates a process of decay in the course of which evil replaces good in all manifestations: peace turns into war, piety into impiety, justice into injustice, simplicity into greed, and spirituality into materiality. The history of man is thus seen as a process, not of improvement and progress, but of decadence and fall, which, however, might not be definitive: a new cycle is sometimes expected to begin after the end of the last age.

A pictorial introduction: *The Course of Empire* by Thomas Cole (1801–48)

A five-canvas series of paintings by Thomas Cole (1801–48), known as *The Course of Empire*, depicts five stages of the human saga. Although these do not need to be illustrations of the Ages, such as they were conceived by the ancient authors, still they show the influence of this old tradition. The landscape or site is the same in all five paintings, as may be noticed by the prominent rock in the background.

1. The Savage State

The "Savage State" depicted by Cole could be seen as suggesting the arrival of contemporary evolutionism [2]. However, also in antiquity there were authors who regarded the Golden Age not as the first beginning but as a period succeeding a rude and uncivilized state. This view is found not only in the euhemeristic accounts of Diodorus Siculus 5.66.1–4, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.36.1, but also in Virgil (*Aeneid*, 8.313), and some passages of Ovid.

2. Pastoral

To the "Savage State" and its hunters depicted in the first painting follows, in the second, an idyllic, "Pastoral" landscape in which man is shown at peace with nature and with himself: the shepherd tends his sheep, children play, and an old man rests—all living in an era of peace and simplicity.

3. Consummation

In the third stage, the world of nature has been replaced, as civilization flourishes, by the world of man. The natural environment is barely visible, and has been covered by buildings, bridges, towers, and ships. The preserved luminosity does not disguise the luxurious artificiality of an Imperial Age.

4. Destruction

The "earthquake" caused by man's folly is depicted in the fourth picture ("Destruction") through the violence that derives from his own greed—made apparent in "Consummation"—now accompanied by hate.

5. Desolation

In the fifth and last picture comes "Desolation", and perhaps extinction.

I. The Ages of the World

The Golden Age

"Lived like gods, free from toil and grief"

The Golden Age is the reign of Cronos/Saturn, implying "the manner of life" under his rule (*o epí Krónou Bíos*, or *Saturnia regna*). This is the age of Right, Trust, Simplicity, Innocence, Peace, and Everlasting Spring. The gods have intercourse with men, and the Earth yields, without being forced, a diet necessarily vegetarian. The beasts are neither hunted nor forced; blood is not shed, not even among animals. There is no navigation, no mining, no laws, no judges, no war. For more details, see the commented Ancient Texts below; some obvious deductions are summarized here:

Nicolas Poussin 1594–1665: *Et in Arcadia Ego*

The Golden Age appears as a lost paradise often associated with the irretrievable reverie of Childhood: it is a state of innocence, purity, freedom, and simplicity, ruled by Justice and obviously permeated by the significance and beauty of the natural world. The spiritual power of this age is revealed by the circumstance that the world is enchanted or "bewitched," as must be a world in which men have intercourse with gods. In this age, the mind prevails over the physical, as may be deduced by the growing "materiality" of the succeeding ages.

This is an illiterate age which enjoys the peace of mind that may derive from a submitted intellect. Consequently, the arts of this age could just be Speech, Music, and Gesture—the visual arts and the sciences requiring the sobriety, study, and calculation of later ages. In the Golden Age, the knowledge of man is one with his vision as the manifold impressions of the world are absorbed by simplicity and trust, both of which derive from innocence. Innocence is a sacred attribute of the Golden Age (and ideally of Childhood):

> Heilige Unschuld, du der Menschen und der
> Götter liebste vertrauteste! du magst im
> Hauße oder draußen ihnen zu Füßen Sizen, del Alten,
> Immerzufriedner Weisheit voll; [3]

Death has not been discovered yet, which suggests that the shepherds in Poussin's painting *Et in Arcadia Ego* belong to the Silver Age. For the man of the Golden Age, ignoring significant divisions or classifications, has no knowledge of the difference between Life and Death, and the man of the Brazen Age is already too acquainted with it.

In such a world, Time cannot know any sections: there is no past, present, or future. Rather, an everlasting present in a timeless world:

> "... fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world." (W. Shakespeare, *As You Like It* I.i.126).

This timelessness could resemble the *negation of time* that Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) in the Introduction [4] to his *The Decline of the West* attributes to antiquity. For he affirms, thinking of Herodotus or Sophocles, that the Greeks regarded Cosmos not as *becoming* but as *being*, and that consequently the Greek man never *became* but always *was*.

In the view of Plato, Virgil, and Ovid there were no seasons either (a form of timelessness), and the men of the Golden Age enjoyed an "Everlasting Spring", the seasons being first established in the following age. Since there is no past, there is no history and no beginning. Man *lives* in the beginning, which is a perennial form of the past which for him appears as everlasting present. Accordingly, there are neither memory, nor myths nor religion. Yet the world being for him naturally sacred, he lives both myth and religion as immanent realities, and therefore ignores both evocation and invocation.

Why did the Golden Age come to an end? Hesiod simply says that the earth covered this generation, but "love of gain" is often mentioned as the cause ending the golden past, as in Pindar (518–438 BC):

> "The men of old ... who mounted the chariot of the Muses with their golden headbands ... lightly shot forth their honey-voiced songs for young men, if one was handsome and had the sweetest ripeness that brings to mind Aphrodite on her lovely throne. For in those days the Muse was not yet a lover of gain, nor did she work for hire. And sweet gentle-voiced odes did not go for sale ... But as things are now, she bids us heed the saying of the Argive man, which comes closest to actual truth: 'Money, money makes the man,' he said, when he lost his wealth and his friends at the same time." (Pindar, *Isthmian Odes* 2.1–11).

Still, Ovid suggests that a heavenly event—the dethronement of Cronos—brought this age to an end. Then a new generation was created—the men of the Silver Age—less noble than its predecessor.

Yet, as we read elsewhere (Apd.1.4.5; Hes.*The*.210)., the change of rule had been predicted, being written, so to speak, in the book of Fate. Consequently, the Golden Age should *necessarily* come to an end, and *necessity* must also apply if the Golden Age is just a phase in a cycle (Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.4; Hesiod,*Works and Days*, 174ff.). Necessity (Ananke) is the mother of the Moerae (Pla.*Rep*.617c.)—the three sisters deciding on human fate.

The Silver Age

"Four seasons"

When the Silver Age begins, most of the gods have returned to heaven. But Justice (Astraea/Dike) is still on earth. Not that she was pleased: she reviled the men of the Silver Age and "yearned for the ways of the men of old" (Aratus, *Phenomena* 115)., but nevertheless she stayed until the Brazen Age dawned.

There is no war in this age, and blood is not shed, but Justice predicts that the Silver men will breed a viler and warlike progeny.

Following Ovid(*Metamorphoses* 1.115), the creation of the seasons (which put an end to the Everlasting Spring of the Golden Age) could be regarded as the most important event of this age. Still there are no ships, but now toil has made its entrance, and man lives by the oxen and the plough (Aratus, *Phenomena* 110). It was Ceres (Demeter), says Ovid, who "forced bulls to yield their necks to the yoke" (*Fasti* 4.400).

In *Georgics* 1.125, Virgil apparently means that it is during this age that Jove created enmity between beasts and men, hiding from the latter the means of sustenance, including fire (just as Cronos had hidden copper, silver, gold, and iron during his rule—*Amores* 3.8.35). But before the rule of Zeus, men were "talking with the animals", and all creatures learned from one another (Plato, *Statesman* 272c).

The Brazen Age

"The lamentable works of Ares"

With the Race of Bronze arrive the eating of flesh, arms, and war ("the lamentable works of Ares"—as Hesiod puts it). Now Justice leaves the earth forever (Aratus). The most outstanding feature of the Race of Bronze is its warlike character.

The Heroic Race

"Nobler and more righteous"

The Heroic Race only appears in Hesiod's account. Although it was "nobler and more righteous", they were nevertheless destroyed by wars (those of Thebes and Troy). Yet, some among the men of the Heroic Race did not perish for ever, and these now dwell in the Islands of the Blest, an oceanic place ruled by Cronos, who, in this manner, keeps the Golden Age alive for a limited number of happy heroes and heroines. Remarkably, this age arrests for some time mankind's decline: a sort of Indian Summer in a Great Year.

The Iron Age

"Labor and sorrow by day, and perishing by night"

The Iron Age is our own, more so for Hesiod than for Ovid, whose texts open other possibilities. This is the last age, but beyond it there are other ages, most probably a new Golden Age. The Iron Age achieves the complete inversion of all features of the Golden Age:

Where there was freedom and ease, there is now slavery and toil. Piety turns into impiety, love into hate, peace into war. All evil qualities flourish like black flowers in a desolate landscape: ingratitude, violence, and envy work unhindered in a forsworn world. Men are dispossessed of honour: the wicked prevail over the worthy, and kinsman slays kinsman. "Labor and sorrow by day, and perishing by night"—that is how Hesiod summarizes the life of this Race. *Aidôs* (Reverence) leaves, and also Nemesis abandons the earth, which obviously means that the world is so utterly cursed that appropriate retribution and punishment for the wicked cannot be expected.

However, that is rather what *will* come: The nature or character of a given age remains the same from the beginning to the end with the exception of the Iron Age. As Jean-Pierre Vernant has pointed out ("Le mythe hésiodique des races. Sur en essai de mise au point", in *La Grèce ancienne* p. 70. Seuil, 1990) a development may be observed within the Iron Age itself. Hesiod, though already living in the Age of Iron , refers to its future rather than to the times in which he lives:

"The father *will* not agree with his children" ... "Men *will* dishonor their parents" ... "There *will* be no favor for the man who keeps his oath" ... "Strength *will* be right, and reverence *will* cease to be" ... "there *will* be no help against evil", etc.

This allows for a distinction between an Early and a Late Iron Age, full decay being first achieved in the latter phase.

Recurrence

In *Eclogues* 4.4, Virgil indicates that the Iron Age may be succeeded by a new Golden Age. This cyclic notion is also found in Plato's *Statesman*. But palingenesis—a rebirth of the ages or their cyclic recurrence—appears already in Hesiod (*Works and Days*, 174ff.), who, having been born during the cruel Iron Age, desires either to have died before that age or else to have been born afterwards. And this "afterwards", we must deem it better than the Iron Age, or else Hesiod's desire would be vain. That "afterwards" could be a new Golden Age, as Virgil suggests, or else a retrograde movement of the Ages going from Iron through Bronze and Silver back to Gold—but very little seems to suggest this alternative, except perhaps Ovid's description of the changes undergone by the four elements:

> "Then they come back again in reversed order …" (Ov.*Met*.15.249).

Later authors have added significance to Hipparchus' discovery of the precession of the equinoxes [4], reasoning that if there is a meaning in the movements of the earth with its tilted axis—rotation, and revolution around the sun—then the movements implied in the precession should have a cyclic significance of its own. Thus, for example, Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) writes:

> "Moreover, the pole which we see signifies the sensible things, which, taking them as a whole, Physics treats; and the pole which we do not see signifies the things that are immaterial, which are not sensible, which Metaphysics treats; and therefore the aforesaid heaven bears a great resemblance to the one science and to the other. Moreover, by its two movements it signifies these two sciences. For by the movement with which each day it revolves and completes a new circuit from point to point, it signifies the corruptible things of nature, which day by day complete their course, their matter changing from form to form; and these Physics treats. By the almost imperceptible movement which it makes from west to east at the rate of one degree in a hundred years, it signifies the incorruptible things which had their beginning through creation by God and shall have no end; and these Metaphysics treats." (Dante, *Convivio* 2.11).

Carnivora and War

During the Golden Age, men lived from the earth which "unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint". Consequently, "they dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things"(Hesiod, *Works and Days* 115). During this blessed period, "no creature was wild, nor did they eat one another, and there was no war among them, nor any strife whatsoever..."(Plato, *Statesman* 271e). And men did not "defile their lips with blood"(Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.96ff.).

Also the Silver men were vegetarian, and knew not "hateful strife", although the oxen and the plough appear in this age, which means that the earth must be forced to yield food: "Then first the seeds of grain were planted in long furrows, and bullocks groaned beneath the heavy yoke". Nevertheless, they still lived a simple life, and ships did not yet bring their livelihood from afar. But the men of the Brazen Age, who replaced the Silver Race, were "the first to eat of the flesh of the ploughing-ox" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.120). And along with that novel custom, they also forged "the sword of the highwayman" (Aratus, *Phenomena* 130). It was then, says Aratus, that Justice, loathing that race, flew to Heaven where she still remains.

The notion that killing animals is the preamble of war persisted in later ages: Having described the gifts with which nature blessed man, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536), wondering at man's degeneration, believed that it must have been through many stages that man became the fierce creature he is today. In the view of Erasmus, the violence of man could only have increased step by step:

1. Man killed wild beasts to defend himself.

2. Man killed wild beasts to win trophies and praise.

3. Man dared to eat the beast he had killed, drinking its blood and sucking its juices.

4. Man went further, killing and eating not only dangerous beasts but also harmless animals, including those who had served him.

5. Accustomed to shedding the blood of harmless animals, man did not hesitate to attack man:

> 5.1. First, he attacked individually.
>
> 5.2. Then, he attacked in groups.
>
> 5.3. Finally, he developed weapons specially designed for attack and defence, perfecting the art of war and turning into virtues the emotions supporting this sort of crime.
>
> > 5.3.1. At the beginning, war was fought with courage and honor, and against foreigners.
> >
> > 5.3.2. Later, trickery replaced bravery.
> >
> > 5.3.3. Later still, armed attacks were inflicted on anybody at will (kinsman against kinsman).
> >
> > 5.3.4. Finally, the aim of fighting was no longer glory but lucre.

See the excerpts below [5]

As he denounces these steps, Erasmus declares that, war being "hellish", no war can ever be "holy":

> "Where is the kingdom of the devil if it is not in war?" (*Adages*, IV i 1).

Voilà a relevant question that could have been first raised when it was suspected that the devil did not appear with horns and tail, but wearing the attire of righteousness! It may be noticed that Erasmus, in his description, adheres to the formula expressed by Juvenal (c. AD 60–135):

> "No one ever fell at once to the worst depths of shame." [2.83]

... and that he, following the tradition inaugurated by Hesiod, believes that the moral qualities of man decay in the course of time, leading to a lawless and cruel existence. Similar steps are found in the account of Seneca, *Hippolytus* 525ff.

Technology

> "Why has not man a microscopic eye?
> For this plain reason, man is not a fly."
> (Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*).

In the account of the Ages of the World, technology (exemplified by mining, navigation, and the art of war) is regarded as the lever of greed, and as a symptom of moral decline as it assists violence against nature

> "...they delved as well into the very bowels of the earth..."
> (Ov.*Met*.1.138),

animals

> "Now was found the way to snare wild beasts with nets and birds with lime..." (Virgil, *Georgics* 1.138),

and against men:

> "Warlike Mars invented new modes of strife and thousand forms of death." (Seneca, *Hippolytus* 550)

In general it will be noticed that whereas the ox is yoked to the plough during the Silver Age—a technological innovation that did not gravely disrupt the simplicity of life—sailing, mining, and war appear between the Brazen and the Iron Age. The ox is eaten first by the Brazen Race (Aratus, *Phenomena* 130).

The ships theme is addressed by Hesiod (soon after the description of the Races—see excerpt), and by several other authors, whereas the criticism against mining is found (among our authors) only in Ovid and Boethius. Seneca's technology section refers mainly to construction ("massive walls, set with many towers"), and then to the lamentable progresses in the art of war. For Ovid, houses appear in the Silver Age.

The "frenzy of war, and the passion for gain" (Vir.*Aen*.8.313) go hand in hand in several accounts, both being contemporaneous with technological progress (mainly navigation and advanced weaponry, but also mining: for the purpose of mining is profit, as are the purposes of navigation and war).

In the view of our authors, navigation reveals the degree of evil that man has already attained, for it unveils his violent intentions towards both the trees of the mountains and foreign shores. They are not tempted by the blessings of peaceful commerce either. For commerce, being ruled by "love of gain", is an evil in itself, probably a form of disguised pillage. A man, they affirm, has all he needs if he stays peacefully at home. By leaving his house and traveling abroad, he calls upon himself famine and disaster.

Also Anacharsis—one of the Seven Sages of Greece—shared this aversion to navigation:

> Q.: What ships are the safest?
> ANACHARSIS: Those which have been hauled ashore.
> Q.: Which are more in number, the living or the dead?
> ANACHARSIS: In which category, then, do you place those who are on the seas?

Anacharsis is credited with the invention of the anchor, which also illustrates the vain efforts of technology: one invention cancels another. Even the 20th century AD, although it had grown accustomed to mass production and mass destruction made possible by technology, exposed its dangers:

> "... Machines that give abundance have left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical, our cleverness hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little ... More than machinery, we need humanity, more than cleverness, we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent, and all will be lost [...]" (The barber in Charles Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, 1940).

But, some would say, it is as easy for the iron man to become golden, as for winter to look like summer, or for night to be as bright as day.

Nostalgia

Obviously, the ancient authors in our list were affected by Nostalgia—a feeling as unknown to the men of the Golden Age as is unknown to Childhood. Nostalgia represents a certain deprivation, and appears first when the awareness of a spiritual loss becomes manifest. At the same time, Nostalgia nurtures and expresses the desire to return to a state in which purity, freedom, beauty and simplicity are redeemed, justice recovered, and meaning found. When time has gone by, and all those values are irremediably lost, Nostalgia sings its sweet tune, inspired by the irretrievable world and the memory of times past.

However, the nostalgic tune of these authors appears blended with a severe tone of reproach against the blind greed and violence with which man attacks man, destroys harmless creatures, and ravages the world of nature. Their reproach is so uncompromising that at times it is even directed against the god, who, having dethroned his father, put a heavier burden on our race. Yet by their reproach, they prove, once more, that Nostalgia's song is sweet at the beginning and bitter at the end:

> "Nessun maggior dolore
> che ricordarsi del tempo felice
> nella miseria" (Dante, *Inf*. V, 121). [6]

As Dante says, to reminisce may make a man miserable. But still more miserable could be he, who, unable to recall one single golden instant, cannot cherish it; or he, who, remembering it, betrays it. And that seems to be the thought of these authors, who, having preserved our golden memories, still remind us of who we were, are, and might be.

II. Ancient texts on the Races/Ages of the World

I. The Ages of the World II. Ancient Texts III. The Ages of Man IV. Notes V. Bibliography

Summary of recurrent themes (marked √, or specifying the age)						
Authors	Deities leave in (age)	Oxen	Navigation	Mining	Palingenesis	No. of Ages mentioned
Hesiod	Aidôs and Nemesis, in Iron		(√) excerpt		√	5
Plato					√	
Aratus	Astraea, in Bronze	Yoked in Silver Eaten in Bronze	After Silver			3+?
Diodorus						1+?
Virgil	Astraea (Virgo)	√	Silver		√	3+?
Dionysius						1+?
Propertius						2+?
Ovid	Astraea in Iron	Yoked in Silver	Iron	Iron		4+2
Seneca		√	√			
Hyginus			After Silver			
Aelian		√				
Statius	Astraea					
Boethius			√	√		1+?

Hesiod (c. 750 BC)

Works and Days 106–200:

Or if you will, I will sum you up another tale well and skilfully—and do you lay it up in your heart,—how the gods and mortal men sprang from one source.

Comments on Hesiod:

- Five Races
- Disruption of the pattern of decay
- Creation and destruction of the races
- Prometheus and Pandora
- Cronos
- Immortality of a kind
- Ships

Within the tradition inaugurated by the Greeks (the Western tradition), Hesiod is the oldest extant source describing the Races (later called *Ages*). In a brief preamble, Hesiod declares that his purpose is to explain "how the gods and mortal men sprang from one source", but he fails to identify that source.

- Five Races
- Disruption of the pattern of decay

Hesiod counts not four but *five* races: Golden, Silver, Brazen, Heroic, and Iron. In Hesiod's description, the men of the Heroic Race are more righteous than those of the preceding race (the Brazen), which appears to disrupt the pattern of decay generally attributed to the succession of the ages.

- Creation and destruction of the races

According to Hesiod, the races of mortal men are created by "the gods who dwell on Olympus" (Golden and Silver), or by Zeus (Brazen, Heroic, Iron). The Golden generation simply disappeared "covered by the earth"; the Silver Race was destroyed by Zeus because of their impiety; and the Brazen Race destroyed itself through war. Then one part of the Heroic Race was destroyed, also in war, but another part still lives in the Islands of the Blest, which are ruled by Cronos. Hesiod predicts that the Iron Race will also be destroyed by Zeus.

- Prometheus and Pandora

In the view of Hesiod, the successive races of mortal men were created by the gods, whereas other sources have asserted that man was created by Prometheus.[7] Then there is the matter of womankind (Pandora)—also a creation of the gods, "the price of fire". In Hesiod's view, she became the cause of all ills that afflict mankind. For before Pandora opened the jar, men lived free from ills, toil, and sicknesses (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 90). Thus the appearance of womankind seems to mark the definitive end of the Golden Race.[8]

- Cronos

When comparing Hesiod's account in *Theogony* 453ff., with his references to Cronos in *Works and Days* 110, this question may arise: How could "the deathless gods who dwell on Olympus" have made a Golden Race, flourishing under the reign of Cronos, if they had been devoured by him (except Zeus, who was hiding)? There is no simple answer to that question, and the uncertainties of the passage (some sections of which have been subject to restoration) could add more difficulties. The myth of the Ages is not escathological as is that of the Islands of the Blest which Cronos rules—a reward for heroes after death—even though there is a strong resemblance between the life of men in those islands (or in the Elysian Plain of Homer, and later Virgil), and the life they lived during the Golden Age.

- Immortality of a kind

Yet, escathology is not completely avoided, since the spirits of the men of the Golden and Silver Races enjoy some kind of immortality. Those of the first became protective spirits living on earth, and those of the second are described as spirits of the underworld. The men of the Brazen Race, "seized by black Death", went "to the dank house of chill Hades", and we may suppose that there's little hope for the men of the Iron Race, given that they are even worse.

- Ships

The ships theme is addressed by Hesiod soon after the description of the Races (return to, or see also section Technology):

"[230] Neither famine nor disaster ever haunt men who do true justice; but light-heartedly they tend the fields which are all their care. The earth bears them victual in plenty, and on the mountains the oak bears acorns upon the top and bees in the midst. Their woolly sheep are laden with fleeces; [235] their women bear children like their parents. They flourish continually with good things, and do not travel on ships, for the grain-giving earth bears them fruit. But for those who practice violence and cruel deeds far-seeing Zeus, the son of Cronos, ordains a punishment. [240] 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, so that the men perish away, and their women do not bear children, and their houses become few, [245] through the contriving of Olympian Zeus. And again, at another time, the son of Cronos either destroys their wide army, or their walls, or else makes an end of their ships on the sea."

Golden

First of all [110] the deathless gods who dwell on Olympus made a golden race of mortal men who lived in the time of Cronos when he was reigning in heaven. And they lived like gods [115] without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, [120] rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods.

But after the earth had covered this generation—they are called pure spirits dwelling on the earth, and are kindly, delivering from harm, and guardians of mortal men; [125] for they roam everywhere over the earth, clothed in mist and keep watch on judgements and cruel deeds, givers of wealth; for this royal right also they received;

We may assume that Cronos' realm was Olympus (Heaven): "First from heavenly Olympus came Saturn ...", says Virgil [*Aen*.8.313]. According to Pausanias 5.7.6, the antiquaries of Elis affirmed that the men of the Golden Age had built in Olympia a temple to Cronos, "the first king of heaven." But in the account of Apollodorus 1.1.1, the first to rule the universe was Uranus. His son Cronos hated him (Hes.*The* 137) from his birth, and later dethroned him (Hes.*The*.170ff.).

These men lived beyond evil, which is how the Golden Race is unanimously conceived. But Hesiod is the only author to make this generation survive as "good spirits of the earth."

Silver

—then they who dwell on Olympus made a second generation which was of silver and less noble by far. It was like the golden race neither in body nor in spirit. [130] A child was brought up at his good mother's side a hundred years, an utter simpleton, playing childishly in his own home. But when they were full grown and were come to the full measure of their prime, they lived only a little time and that in sorrow because of their foolishness, for they could not keep from sinning and [135] from wronging one another, nor would they serve the immortals, nor sacrifice on the holy altars of the blessed ones as it is right for men to do wherever they dwell. Then Zeus the son of Cronos was angry and put them away, because they would not give honor to the blessed gods who live on Olympus.

[140] But when earth had covered this generation also—they are called blessed spirits of the underworld by men, and, though they are of second order, yet honor attends them also.

"Less noble by far." The author makes plain the stupidity of this race. Hesiod is again alone in giving such a low grade to the Silver Race.

Although they lived such a little time as grown up men, their mother must in any case have lived one hundred years of adulthood to take care of her childish darlings.

The impiety of this Silver Race is generally reserved, in other authors, for later ages.

Despite their stupidity and impiety, Hesiod honours them with some kind of immortality as he has also done with the men of the previous age.

Brazen

—Zeus the Father made a third generation of mortal men, a brazen race, sprung from ash-trees ; and it was in no way equal to the silver age, [145] but was terrible and strong. They loved the lamentable works of Ares and deeds of violence; they ate no bread, but were hard of heart like adamant, fearful men. Great was their strength and unconquerable the arms which grew from their shoulders on their strong limbs. [150] Their armor was of bronze, and their houses of bronze, and of bronze were their implements: there was no black iron. These were destroyed by their own hands and passed to the dank house of chill Hades, and left no name: terrible though they were, [155] black Death seized them, and they left the bright light of the sun.

"In no way equal ...", i.e. mainly that they were not childish and stupid like the previous race, but terrible and strong, and lovers of war.

The hardness of this race is represented not only by their utensils, but also by their houses. The warlike and fierce character of the Bronze Race is its most prominent feature, and almost nothing else is told of them.

Hesiod grants no immortality to these men, as he has done with the two previous races.

Heroic

But when earth had covered this generation also, Zeus the son of Cronos made yet another, the fourth, upon the fruitful earth, which was nobler and more righteous, a god-like race of hero-men who are called [160] demi-gods, the race before our own, throughout the boundless earth. Grim war and dread battle destroyed a part of them, some in the land of Cadmus at seven-gated Thebes when they fought for the flocks of Oedipus, and some, when it had brought them in ships over the great sea gulf [165] to Troy for rich-haired Helen's sake: there death's end enshrouded a part of them. But to the others father Zeus the son of Cronos gave a living and an abode apart from men, and made them dwell at the ends of earth. [170] And they live untouched by sorrow in the islands of the blessed along the shore of deep-swirling Ocean, happy heroes for whom [173] the grain-giving earth bears honey-sweet fruit flourishing thrice a year, [169] far from the deathless gods, and Cronos rules over them; [169a] for the father of men and gods released him from his bonds. [169b] And these last equally have honor and glory.

[169c] And again far-seeing Zeus made yet another generation, the fifth, of men [169d] who are upon the bounteous earth.

The Heroic Age only appears in the account of Hesiod, disrupting the pattern of decay that generally is associated with the myth of the ages. This is the only race that is nobler than its predecessor.

In the view of this poet, the men of the Heroic Race are closer to the gods than those of the Silver, Brazen and Iron Races. For they are "god-like", and several among them joined the gods, living a blessed life in the Islands of the Blest ruled by Cronos.

Still, a part of them perished in war, like the men of the previous age.

Iron

[return to sections Golden Age or to Recurrence]

[174] Thereafter, would that I were not among the men of the fifth generation, [175] but either had died before or been born afterwards. For now truly is a race of iron, and men never rest from labor and sorrow by day, and from perishing by night; and the gods shall lay sore trouble upon them. But, notwithstanding, even these shall have some good mingled with their evils. [180] And Zeus will destroy this race of mortal men also when they come to have grey hair on the temples at their birth. The father will not agree with his children, nor the children with their father, nor guest with his host, nor comrade with comrade; nor will brother be dear to brother as aforetime. [185] Men will dishonor their parents as they grow quickly old, and will carp at them, chiding them with bitter words, hard-hearted they, not knowing the fear of the gods. They will not repay their aged parents the cost of their nurture, for might shall be their right: and one man will sack another's city. [190] There will be no favor for the man who keeps his oath or for the just or for the good; but rather men will praise the evil-doer and his violent dealing. Strength will be right, and reverence will cease to be; and the wicked will hurt the worthy man, speaking false words against him, and will swear an oath upon them. [195] Envy, foul-mouthed, delighting in evil, with scowling face, will go along with wretched men one and all. [200] And then Aidôs and Nemesis, with their sweet forms wrapped in white robes, will go from the wide-pathed earth and forsake mankind to join the company of the deathless gods: and bitter sorrows will be left for mortal men, and there will be no help against evil.

"... been born afterwards" shows that Hesiod hoped for a better life after the end of the iron generation (see also Recurrence) which is not the last race. New and better races come afterwards.

Whereas the Golden men are beloved of the gods, the Iron men are shunned by them. The Iron Race represents the inversion of the Golden Race. Consequently, the last deities (Reverence and Divine Retribution) leave the earth. The departure of Nemesis indicates that punishment for evil deeds cannot be expected ("there will be no help against evil") until Zeus destroys the whole race. In the view of other authors, the last deity to fly heavenward was Astraea (see Summary).

Aging is considered in this passage. The Iron Race is an old race, and therefore the Golden Race must have been a young one. Thus the Golden appears as the first age, and the Iron as the last. Accordingly, the Iron men have a tendency to aging, and they will be destroyed "when they come to have grey hair on the temples at their birth".

Thus it is suggested that humanity, like a man, goes from Childhood to Old Age through intermediate phases (see The Ages of Man).

Hesiod translated by Hugh G. Evelyn-White, LCL 1914

As Jean-Pierre Vernant has pointed out, Hesiod speaks of the future although this is his own time:

"The father *will* not agree with his children" ... "Men *will* dishonor their parents" ... "There *will* be no favor for the man who keeps his oath" ... "Strength *will* be right, and reverence *will* cease to be" ... "there *will* be no help against evil", etc.

Obviously, Hesiod conceived an Early, and a Late Iron Age, full decay being the lot of the late phase.

Plato, 427–347 BC

The Statesman 268e–274d:

[return to section Recurrence]

Stranger: Of the portents recorded in ancient tales many did happen and will happen again. Such an one is the portent connected with the tale of the quarrel between Atreus and Thyestes. You have doubtless heard of it and remember what is said to have taken place.
Younger Socrates: You refer, I suppose, to the token of the golden lamb.
[269a] **Stranger**: Oh no; I mean the change in the rising and setting of the sun and the other heavenly bodies, how in those times they used to set in the quarter where they now rise, and used to rise where they now set, but the god at the time of the quarrel, you recall, changed all that to the present system as a testimony in favor of Atreus.
Younger Socrates: Yes, I've heard that, too.
Stranger: And again we have often heard the tale of the reign of Cronos. [269b]
Younger Socrates: Yes, very often.
Stranger: And how about the story that the ancient folk were earthborn and not begotten of one another?
Younger Socrates: That is one of the old tales, too.
Stranger: Well, all these stories and others still more remarkable have their source in one and the same event, but in the lapse of ages some of them have been lost and others are told in fragmentary and disconnected fashion. But no one has told the event which is the cause of them all, [269c] and so I must tell it now; for that will help us to make clear the nature of the king.
Younger Socrates: Very good; just tell your tale and omit nothing.
Stranger: Listen then. During a certain period God himself goes with the universe as guide in its revolving course, but at another epoch, when the cycles have at length reached the measure of his allotted time, he lets it go, [269d] and of its own accord it turns backward in the opposite direction, since it is a living creature and is endowed with intelligence by him who fashioned it in the beginning. Now this reversal of its motion is an inevitable part of its nature for the following reason.
Younger Socrates: What reason?
Stranger: Absolute and perpetual immutability is a property of only the most divine things of all, and body does not belong to this class. Now that which we call heaven and the universe has received from its creator many blessed qualities, but then, too, it partakes also of a bodily nature; [269e] therefore it is impossible for it to be entirely free from change; it moves, however, so far as it is able to do so, with a single motion in the same place and the same manner, and therefore it has acquired the reverse motion in a circle, because that involves the least deviation from its own motion. But to turn itself for ever is hardly possible except for the power that guides all moving things; and that this should turn now in one direction and now in the opposite direction is contrary to divine law. As the result of all this, we must not say either that the universe turns itself always, or that it is always turned by God in two opposite courses, [270a] or again that two divinities opposed to one another turn it. The only remaining alternative is what I suggested a little while ago, that the universe is guided at one time by an extrinsic divine cause, acquiring the power of living again and receiving renewed immortality from the Creator, and at another time it is left to itself and then moves by its own motion, being left to itself at such a moment that it moves backwards through countless ages, because it is immensely large and most evenly balanced, and turns upon the smallest pivot. [270b]
Younger Socrates: All that account of yours appears, at any rate, very reasonable.
Stranger: Then, in the light of what has been said, let us consider and gain understanding of the event which we said was the cause of all those wonderful portents; for it is really just this.
Younger Socrates: Just what?
Stranger: The fact that at certain periods the universe has its present circular motion, and at other periods it revolves in the reverse direction.
Younger Socrates: How was this the cause?
Stranger: We cannot help believing that of all the changes which take place in the heavens this reversal is [270c] the greatest and most complete.
Younger Socrates: It certainly seems to be so.
Stranger: Therefore we must also believe that at the same time the greatest changes come upon us who dwell within the heavens.
Younger Socrates: That is likely too.
Stranger: And animals cannot well endure many great and various changes at once. That is a familiar fact, is it not?
Younger Socrates: Of course.
Stranger: Inevitably, then, there is at that time great destruction of animals in general, and only a small part of the human race survives; [270d] and the survivors have many experiences wonderful and strange, the greatest of which, a consequence of the reversal of everything at the time when the world begins to turn in the direction opposed to that of its present revolution, is this.
Younger Socrates: What is that experience?
Stranger: First the age of all animals, whatever it was at the moment, stood still, and every mortal creature stopped growing older in appearance [270e] and then reversed its growth and became, as it were, younger and more tender; the hoary locks of the old men grew dark, and bearded cheeks grew smooth again as their possessors reverted to their earlier ages, and the bodies of young men grew smoother and smaller day by day and night by night, until they became as new-born babes, to which they were likened in mind and body; and then at last they wasted away entirely and wholly disappeared. And the bodies of those who died by violence in those times quickly underwent the same changes, [271a] were destroyed, and disappeared in a few days.
Younger Socrates: But then, Stranger, how did animals come into existence in those days? How were they begotten of one another?
Stranger: It is clear, Socrates, that being begotten of one another was no part of the natural order of that time, but the earth-born race which, according to tradition, once existed, was the race which returned at that time out of the earth; and the memory of it was preserved by our earliest ancestors, who were born in the beginning of our period and therefore were next neighbors to the end of the previous period of the world's revolution, [271b] with no interval between. For they were to us the heralds of these stories which are nowadays unduly disbelieved by many people. For you must, I think, consider what would result. It is a natural consequence of the return of the old to childhood that those who are dead and lying in the earth take shape and come to life again, since the process of birth is reversed along with the reversal of the world's revolution; for this reason they are inevitably earth-born, [271c] and hence arises their name and the tradition about them, except those of them whom

Comments on Plato

The account of the Stranger may be summarized as follows:

God (also called Creator—or Demiurgus—Father, Composer, Supreme Spirit, and Pilot) causes the world to revolve in a forward direction during a certain period of time. God is the extrinsic cause of this motion. This is the time of the Autochthons (earthborn or "sons of the soil") and of "the reign of Cronos". God supervises man, and a number of deities rule the beasts and different regions of the world.

Later, God withdraws (along with the administrative deities), a cataclysm occurs, the world starts revolving "backwards" of its own accord, and thus "the age of Zeus" commences. When the cataclysm subsides, there is order again; for the world remembers and practises the teachings of the Creator. But in the course of time the world grows oblivious, and the ensuing carelessness threatens destruction. At this point, God restores order again through the "forward" motion to prevent complete dissolution.

"The reign of Cronos" or Golden Age occurs when God steers the motion of the universe. Plato does not mention the other ages in this context, but when the pattern of the ages is combined with the phases derived from the motion of the universe described by the Stranger, the following sequence is obtained:

1. Golden Age. "The reign of Cronos" [271d]
2. Cataclysm [273a]—as motion is reversed.
3. Silver Age: "got on most excellently" [273c]
4. Bronze Age: "disorder prevailed" [273c]
5. Iron Age: "dire trouble" [273d].
6. Divine intervention restores Golden Age: "he took again his place", "reversed whatever had become unsound" [273e]. The motion is once more reversed.

When the third period comes after the cataclysm, all deities have already left. As a way of compensating the solitude and defenceless of man, the gifts of the gods are given to him by deities such as Hephaestus, Athena, Prometheus, Demeter, and Dionysus [274c]. In periods 3, 4, and 5, man takes care of himself without any further divine help. But man's self-government ends in disaster (5) and God intervenes again (6), reversing the motion of the universe and putting it under His direction.

The description of the reign of Cronos [from 271d] coincides in general with other accounts. An important feature of this dialogue is the idea of recurrence exposed by the Stranger: the Ages belong to a cycle and will happen again.

The harmonious life under the reign of Cronos is illustrated and emphasized by the friendly relation between men and beasts [272c], made possible by a common language. At this time man understands the language of nature, whereas in later times the language of animals and of the earth must necessarily be perceived as nonsensical noise.

The generation ruled by Cronos was, in this account, earthborn (Autochthonous or "sons of the soil"), but other authors say otherwise. This is the reason why, explains Plato [272a], there were no families or states.

This is not a beginning nor is this a first race, since these men had "no recollection of their former lives". They had evidently lived before, and, as we read [269c], this phase forms part of a cosmic cycle.

During this time, says Plato [272a], the climate was temperate, which coincides with the everlasting spring of Ovid.

Compared with the age of Cronos, that of Zeus is known by "own experience", a milder reproach than the list presented by Virgil (*Georgics* 1.125).

God removed to some other fate.
Younger Socrates: Certainly that follows from what preceded. But was the life in the reign of Cronos, which you mentioned, in that previous period of revolution or in ours? For evidently the change in the course of the stars and the sun takes place in both periods.
Stranger: You have followed my account very well. [271d] No, the life about which you ask, when all the fruits of the earth sprang up of their own accord for men, did not belong at all to the present period of revolution, but this also belonged to the previous one. For then, in the beginning, God ruled and supervised the whole revolution, and so again, in the same way, all the parts of the universe were divided by regions among gods who ruled them, and, moreover, the animals were distributed by species and flocks among inferior deities as divine shepherds, each of whom was in all respects the independent guardian of the creatures under his own care, [271e] so that no creature was wild, nor did they eat one another, and there was no war among them, nor any strife whatsoever. To tell all the other consequences of such an order of the world would be an endless task. But the reason for the story of the spontaneous life of mankind is as follows: God himself was their shepherd, watching over them, just as man, being an animal of different and more divine nature than the rest, now tends the lower species of animals. And under his care there were no states, [272a] nor did men possess wives or children; for they all came to life again out of the earth, with no recollection of their former lives. So there were no states or families, but they had fruits in plenty from the trees and other plants, which the earth furnished them of its own accord, without help from agriculture. And they lived for the most part in the open air, without clothing or bedding; for the climate was tempered for their comfort, and the abundant grass that grew up out of the earth furnished them soft couches. [272b] That, Socrates, was the life of men in the reign of Cronos; but the life of the present age, which is said to be the age of Zeus, you know by your own experience. Would you be able and willing to decide which of them is the more blessed?
Younger Socrates: Certainly not.
Stranger: Shall I, then, make some sort of a judgement for you?
Younger Socrates: Do so, by all means.
Stranger: Well, then, if the foster children of Cronos, having all this leisure and the ability to converse not only with human beings but also with beasts, [272c] made full use of all these opportunities with a view to philosophy, talking with the animals and with one another and learning from every creature that, through possession of some peculiar power he may have had in any respect beyond his fellows perceptions tending towards an increase of wisdom, it would be easy to decide that the people of those old times were immeasurably happier than those of our epoch. Or if they merely ate and drank till they were full and gossiped with each other and the animals, telling such stories as are even now told about them, [272d] in that case, too, it would, in my opinion, be very easy to reach a decision. However, let us pass those matters by, so long as there is no one capable of reporting to us what the desires of the people in those days were in regard to knowledge and the employment of speech. The reason why we revived this legend must be told, in order that we may get ahead afterwards. For when the time of all those conditions was accomplished and the change was to take place and all the earth-born race had at length been used up, [272e] since every soul had fulfilled all its births by falling into the earth as seed its prescribed number of times, then the helmsman of the universe dropped the tiller and withdrew to his place of outlook, and fate and innate desire made the earth turn backwards. So, too, all the gods who share, each in his own sphere, the rule of the Supreme Spirit, promptly perceiving what was taking place, let go the parts of the world which were under their care. [273a] And as the universe was turned back and there came the shock of collision, as the beginning and the end rushed in opposite directions, it produced a great earthquake within itself and caused a new destruction of all sorts of living creatures. But after that, when a sufficient time had elapsed, there was rest now from disturbance and confusion, calm followed the earthquakes, and the world went on its own accustomed course in orderly fashion, exercising care and rule [273b] over itself and all within itself, and remembering and practising the teachings of the Creator and Father to the extent of its power, at first more accurately and at last more carelessly; and the reason for this was the material element in its composition, because this element, which was inherent in the primeval nature, was infected with great disorder before the attainment of the existing orderly universe. For from its Composer the universe has received only good things; but from its previous condition it retains in itself and creates in the animals all the elements of harshness and injustice [273c] which have their origin in the heavens. Now as long as the world was nurturing the animals within itself under the guidance of the Pilot, it produced little evil and great good; but in becoming separated from him it always got on most excellently during the time immediately after it was let go, but as time went on and it grew forgetful, the ancient condition of disorder prevailed more and more [273d] and towards the end of the time reached its height, and the universe, mingling but little good with much of the opposite sort, was in danger of destruction for itself and those within it. Therefore at that moment God, who made the order of the universe, perceived that it was in dire trouble, and fearing that it might founder in the tempest of confusion and sink in the boundless sea of diversity, [273e] he took again his place as its helmsman, reversed whatever had become unsound and unsettled in the previous period when the world was left to itself, set the world in order, restored it and made it immortal and ageless. So now the whole tale is told; but for our purpose of exhibiting the nature of the king it will be enough to revert to the earlier part of the story. For when the universe was turned again into the present path of generation, the age of individuals came again to a stop, and that led to new processes, the reverse of those which had gone before. For the animals which had grown so small as almost to disappear grew larger, and those newly born from the earth with hoary hair died and passed below the earth again. And all other things changed, [274a] imitating the condition of the universe and conforming to it, and so too pregnancy and birth and nurture necessarily imitated and conformed to the rest; for no living creature could any longer come into being by the union of other elements, but just as the universe was ordered to be the ruler of its own course, so in the same way the parts were ordered, so far as they could, to grow and beget and give nourishment of themselves under the same guidance. [274b] And now we have come at last to the point for the sake of which this whole discourse was begun. For much might be said, and at great length, about the other animals, their previous forms and the causes of their several changes; but about mankind there is less to say and it is more to our purpose. For men, deprived of the care of the deity who had possessed and tended us, since most of the beasts who were by nature unfriendly had grown fierce, and they themselves were feeble and unprotected, were ravaged by the beasts [274c] and were in the first ages still without resources or skill; the food which had formerly offered itself freely had failed them, and they did not yet know how to provide for themselves, because no necessity had hitherto compelled them. On all these accounts they were in great straits; and that is the reason why the gifts of the gods that are told of in the old traditions were given us with the needful information and instruction—fire by Prometheus, the arts by Hephaestus and the goddess who is his fellow-artisan, seeds and plants by other deities. [274d] And from these has arisen all that constitutes human life, since, as I said a moment ago, the care of the gods had failed men and they had to direct their own lives and take care of themselves, like the whole universe, which we imitate and follow through all time, being born and living now in our present manner and in that other epoch in the other manner.

Aratus of Soli (315–245 BC)

Phaenomena 96–136:

Beneath both feet of Bootes mark the Maiden, who in her hands bears the gleaming Ear of Corn. Whether she be daughter of Astraeus, who, men say, was of old the father of the stars, or child of other sire, untroubled be her course! [100] But another tale is current among men, how of old she dwelt on earth and met men face to face, nor ever disdained in olden time the tribes of men and women, but mingling with them took her seat, immortal though she was. [105] Her men called Justice; but she assembling the elders, it might be in the market-place or in the wide-wayed streets, uttered her voice, ever urging on them judgements kinder to the people. Not yet in that age had men knowledge of hateful strife, or carping contention, or din of battle, but a simple life they lived. [110] Far from them was the cruel sea and not yet from afar did ships bring their livelihood, but the oxen and the plough and Justice herself, queen of the peoples, giver of things just, abundantly supplied their every need. Even so long as the earth still nurtured the Golden Race, she had her dwelling on earth. [115] But with the Silver Race only a little and no longer with the utter readiness did she mingle, for that she yearned for the ways of the men of old. Yet in that Silver Age was she still upon the earth; but from the echoing hills at even-tide she came alone, nor spake to any man in gentle words. [120] But when she had filled the great heights with gathering crowds, then would she with threats rebuke their evil ways, and declare that never more at their prayer would she reveal her face to man. "Behold what manner of race the fathers of the Golden Age left behind them! Far meaner than themselves! but ye will breed a viler progeny! [125] Verily wars and cruel bloodshed shall be unto men and grievous woe shall be laid upon them." Even so she spake and sought the hills and left the people all gazing towards her still. But when they, too, were dead, and when, more ruinous than they which went before, [130*] the Race of Bronze was born, who were the first to forge the sword of the highwayman, and the first to eat of the flesh of the ploughing-ox, then verily did Justice loathe that race of men and fly heavenward and took up that abode, where (135] even now in the night time the Maiden is seen of men, established near to far-seen Bootes.

*return to sections Carnivora and War or Technology

Aratus translated by G. R. Mair, LCL 1921

Comments on Aratus:

The text of Aratus of Soli, consecrated to the constellation of Virgo (*Parthénos*), emphasizes the departure, during the Bronze Age, of Astraea (Dike, or Justice), also mentioned by Ovid and Virgil but omitted by Hesiod, who instead predicts the departure of Aidôs (Reverence) and Nemesis during the times of the Iron Race. These deities being gone, says Hesiod, "there will be no help against evil". According to Ovid, Astraea "abandoned the blood-soaked earth" during the Iron Age.

Having left the earth, says Aratus, Astraea is now the constellation of Virgo, which, according to other sources, could represent someone else (as recorded by Hyginus, *Astronomica* 2.25, or by Manilius, *Astronomica* 2.32, 4.542).

The men of the Silver Age live by the oxen and the plough, and have not yet learned the art of navigation. The simple agricultural life is the kind of life that Justice cherishes, and the only one capable to provide both sustenance and happiness:

"O happy farmers! too happy, should they come to know their blessings! for whom, far from the clash of arms, Earth herself, most fair in dealing, unbidden pours forth from her soil an easy sustenance." (Vir.*Geo*.2.458).

According to Hesiod, *Theogony* 902, Astraea (Dike) is the daughter of Zeus and Themis.

"... but ye will breed a viler progeny..." Although the Races are generally thought to have been created by the gods, man himself is responsible for the spiritual decay. Reproaches (on account of degeneration) are addressed sometimes against the gods (Virgil, particularly *Georgics* 1.125), and sometimes against man (but mainly against the latter).

Diodorus Siculus (80–20 BC)

Diodorus 5.66.1–4: "The Titans numbered six men and five women [...] Cronos, since he was the eldest of the Titans, became king and caused all men who were his subjects to change from a rude way of living to civilized life, and for this reason he received great approbation and visited many regions of the inhabited earth. Among all he met he introduced justice and sincerity of soul, and this is why the tradition has come down to later generations that the men of Cronos' time were good-hearted, altogether guileless, and blest with felicity."

Diodorus translated by C. H. Oldfather, LCL 1939

Comments on Diodorus

In his euhemeristic account, Diodorus makes men of the Titans, and of Cronos a king and benefactor who introduced decency in his realm. See also Virgil (*Aeneid*) and Dionysius of Halicarnassus below.

Diodorus says further that Cronos' kingdom was pre-eminent in the western regions, but still the "civilized life"—as shown by this paragraph—consists of spiritual qualities.

Virgil (70–19 BC)

Eclogues* 4.4:

Now is come the last age of the song of Cumae; the great line of the centuries begins anew. Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns; now a new generation descends from heaven on high. Only do thou, pure Lucina, smile on the birth of the child, under whom the iron brood shall first cease, and a golden race spring up throughout the world.

*return to sections Golden Age or Recurrence

Georgics* 1.125:

Before Jove's day no tillers subdued the land. Even to mark the field or divide it with bounds was unlawful. Men made gain for the common store, and Earth yielded all, of herself, more freely, when none begged for her gifts. It was he that in black serpents put their deadly venom, bade the wolves plunder and the ocean swell; shook honey from the leaves, hid fire from view, and stopped the wine that ran everywhere in streams, so that practice, by taking thought, might little by little hammer out various arts, might seek the corn-blade in furrows, and strike forth from veins of flint the hidden fire. Then first did rivers feel the hollowed alder; then the sailor numbered the stars and called them by name [...] [138]Now was found the way to snare wild beasts with nets and birds with lime and cordon off wide coverts with rings of hounds [...] Next hardened iron came and the creaking saw-blade (for the earliest men split wood with wedges), and last the various arts. Toil mastered everything, relentless toil and the pressure of pinching poverty. Ceres was the first to teach men to turn the earth with iron, when the acorns and arbutes of the sacred wood began to fail, and Dodona denied men food [...]

*return to sections Silver Age, or Comments on Plato

***Georgics* 2.336:**

Days such as these [spring days] shone out and went their way, I can well believe, at the dawn of the infant world: Springtime it was, the great world celebrated Spring, and the east winds spared their wintry blasts [...]

***Georgics* 2.532:**

... before the Cretan king held sceptre, and before a godless race banqueted on slaughtered bullocks, such was the life golden Saturn lived on earth, while yet none had heard the clarion blare, none the sword-blades ring, as they were laid on the stubborn anvil.

Aeneid* 8.313:

Comments on Virgil

As explained by H. Rushton Fairclough (translator of Virgil in the Loeb edition), the "song of Cumae" refers to the Sibylline books and the utterances of the Sibyl of Cumae. A prophecy contained in them established that a new cycle of the ages would begin after the Age of Iron had passed. In the *Aeneid*, the Sibyl of Cumae leads Aeneas to the Underworld, where he meets not only the souls of those who have lived but also of those who shall be born.

The Virgin is Astraea (Justice, mentioned in detail by Aratus). Lucina is Diana (Artemis), in her quality of protectress of women in childbirth.

"It was he ..."
The imperfections of the world are the responsibility of Jove, who, having dethroned his father, put an end to the Golden Age and a heavier burden on the race of men.

As time advances, toil increases—despite or because of the introduction of new technologies (sailing, the saw-blade, and agricultural progress)—as the spiritual qualities of man decrease.

The notion of an everlasting spring in the origin of the world is presented again by Ovid, for whom the seasons are first created during the Silver Age. Also Plato says (*Statesman* 272a) that the climate was temperate under the reign of Cronos.

The "Cretan king" refers to Zeus, who was born in Crete. To banquet on slaughtered bullocks is the pleasure of the godless; that would not happen during the golden reign of Saturn. The sword-blades are often seen as the result of such banquets (see also Carnivora and War).

Then King Evander, founder of Rome's citadel [says to Aeneas]: "In these woodlands the native Fauns and Nymphs once dwelt, and a race of men sprung from trunks of trees and hardy oak, who had no rule nor art of life, and knew not how to yoke the ox or to lay up stores, or to husband their gains; but tree-branches nurtured them and the huntsman's savage fare. First from heavenly Olympus came Saturn, fleeing from the weapons of Jove and exiled from his lost realm. He gathered together the unruly race, scattered over mountain heights, and gave them laws, and chose that the land be called Latium, since in these borders he had found a safe hiding-place. Under his reign were the golden ages men tell of: in such perfect peace he ruled the nations; till little by little there crept in a race of worse sort and duller hue, the frenzy of war, and the passion for gain.

*return to sections: Thomas Cole, Technology, Commens on Hesiod (Golden), Comments on Ovid (Golden or Iron).

Virgil translated by H. Ruston Fairclough, LCL 1916. Sections of Georgics translated by L. P. Wilkinson, Penguin 1982

In this passage, the men of the Golden Age are not originally golden, but rude and unruly, having sprung from trees. They were civilized by Cronos, which should mean that the Golden Age is not a beginning, but a phase preceded by a savage state, like in the painting by Cole. Saturn is a civilizer, like in Diodorus' account.

However, not to yoke the ox nor care for gains nor lay up stores would rather be attributes of the Golden Race. Therefore Saturn, as he civilizes these rudes, appears as introducing a Silver Age.

A certain euhemeristic scent seems to come from the Italian exile of Saturn, as if for Jove Italy were out of reach... Yet Saturn comes from Olympus, "his lost realm", which is more than a Greek mountain and is now in the possession of Jove.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60 BC–AD 7)

[1.36.1]: "There is another legend related by the inhabitants, to the effect that before the reign of Jupiter, Saturn was lord in this land [Italy] and that the celebrated manner of life in his reign, abounding in the produce of every season, was enjoyed by none more than by them..."

Dionysius translated by Earnest Cary, LCL 1937

Comments on Dionysius

Although Dionysius regards Saturn as a god, he still describes him as a king. Also he largely attributes the prosperity of Saturn's reign to Italy's exceptional fertility and ability to be self-sufficient due to the variety of its commodities. For other euhemeristic accounts of the Golden Age, see also Virgil (*Aeneid*) and Diodorus.

Since there is a produce of every season, there is no everlasting spring in this legend as in the account of his contemporary Ovid.

Propertius, born 50 BC

[*Elegies* 2.32.49] Sooner will you be able to dry the waters of the sea and pluck with mortal hands the stars set in high heaven than ensure that Roman girls are unwilling to sin: this was the fashion in the reign of Saturn. But when Deucalion's flood swept over the world and after Deucalion's legendary flood, tell me, who was able to keep his bed chaste, what goddess could live alone with one god only?

Propertius translated by G. P. Goold, LCL 1990

Comments on Propertius

Innocence was the fashion in the reign of Saturn, and here Propertius identifies Innocence with Chastity. Yet Chastity, which sometimes is not at all innocent, could be regarded as just a form of Innocence. In the mind of this poet, not only Roman girls have lost their innocence since the Flood, but also gods and goddesses.

Traditionally, simplicity is a virtue of the gods, who, however, are not regarded as innocent. The men of the Golden Age are generally seen as leading a life in both simplicity and innocence. Chastity, regarded as sexual abstinence, is not an attribute of the gods, since creation (of the Cosmos) and procreation are the same: in the myths the world appears as a result of love and intercourse.

In the view of Propertius, the Flood in the age of Deucalion put an end to the Golden Age. Yet we are also told that the Flood was sent by Zeus because of the impiety of men such as Lycaon and his sons (Apd.3.8.2; Ov.*Met*.1.260 ff.). According to Apollodorus 1.7.2, the men destroyed by the Flood were those of the Bronze Age.

Ovid (43 BC–AD 17)

Metamorphoses 1.89–150, 15.96ff., *Amores* 3.8.35, *Fasti* 4.395.

Golden

Metamorphoses 1.89: Golden was that first age, which, [90] with no one to compel, without a law, of its own will, kept faith and did the right. There was no fear of punishment, no threatening words were to be read on brazen tablets; no suppliant throng gazed fearfully upon its judge's face; but without defenders lived secure. Not yet had the pine-tree, felled on its native mountains, descended thence into the watery plain to visit other lands; men knew no shores except their own. [95] Not yet were cities begirt with steep moats; there were no trumpets of straight, no horns of curving brass, no swords or helmets. There was no need at all of armed men, [100] for nations, secure from war's alarms, passed the years in gentle ease. The earth herself, without compulsion, untouched by hoe or plowshare, of herself gave all things needful. And men, content with food which came with no one's seeking, gathered the arbute fruit, strawberries from the mountain-sides, cornel-cherries, [105] berries hanging thick upon the prickly bramble, and acorns fallen from the spreading tree of Jove. Then spring was everlasting, and gentle zephyrs with warm breath played with the flowers that sprang unplanted. Anon the earth, untilled, brought forth her stores of grain, and the fields, though unfallowed, [110] grew white with the heavy, bearded wheat. Streams of milk and streams of sweet nectar flowed, and yellow honey was distilled from the verdant oak.

Metamorphoses 15.96ff.: But that pristine age, which we have named the golden age, was blessed with the fruit of the trees and the herbs which the ground sends forth, nor did men defile their lips with blood. Then birds plied their wings in safety through the heaven, and the hare loitered all unafraid in the tilled fields, nor did its own guilelessness hang the fish upon the hook. All things were free from treacherous snares, fearing no guile and full of peace.

Amores 3.8.35: But when ancient Saturn had his kingdom in the sky, the deep earth held lucre all in its dark embrace. Copper and silver and gold and heavy iron he had hid away in the lower realms, and there was no massy metal. Yet better were his gifts—increase without the curved share, and fruits and honeys brought to light from the hollow oak. And no one broke the glebe with the strong share, no measurer marked the limit of the soil, they did not sweep the seas, stirring the waters with dipping oar; the shore in those days was the utmost path for man.

Fasti, 4.395: The bread of the first mortals consisted of the green herbs which the earth yielded without solicitation; and now they plucked the living grass from the turf, and now the tender leaves of tree tops furnished a feast.

Silver

Comments on Ovid

- Creation of man
- Everlasting spring
- Seasons, houses, bullocks, mining
- Astraea and Demeter
- Beyond the Iron Age
- The Flood of Deucalion

- Creation of man

Ovid describes the succession of the Ages without explaining their origin, whereas Hesiod says that some god or gods created the Races. Ovid also leaves open the question of whether a god or Prometheus created man, although he derives the hardness of man's nature from the stones of Deucalion.

It will be remembered that sometimes it is said that men sprung from trunks of trees, the oak, or stones [Vir.*Aeneid* 8.313; Hom.*Od*.19.163]. For Hesiod, the Brazen Race, though created by Zeus, was "sprung from ash-trees" (see also note 8). Otherwise Prometheus (Apd.1.7.1; Pau.10.4.4), or else Cura (Hyg.*Fab*.220) moulded the first man out of mud. In addition, some generations of men have been called autochthonous (sons of the soil), a race which, according to Plato, is born when the motion of the universe is reversed. These men have no parents, but arise from the ground like a plant does. They are the dead coming back to life and getting younger as they live:

"It is a natural consequence of the return of the old to childhood that those who are dead and lying in the earth take shape and come to life again, since the process of birth is reversed along with the reversal of the world's revolution." (Pla.*Sta*.271b).

- Everlasting spring

The description of the Golden Age is roughly similar to that of Hesiod, but we find in Ovid the notion of everlasting spring and the mention of nectar, the food of the gods.

- Seasons, houses, bullocks, mining

Metamorphoses 1.114: After Saturn had been banished to the dark land of death, and the world was under the sway of Jove, the silver race came in, [115] lower in the scale than gold, but of greater worth than yellow brass. Jove now shortened the bounds of the old-time spring, and through winter, summer, variable autumn, and brief spring completed the year in four seasons. Then first the parched air glared white with burning heat, [120] and icicles hung down congealed by freezing winds. In that age men first sought the shelter of houses. Their homes had heretofore been caves, dense thickets, and branches bound together with bark. Then first the seeds of grain were planted in long furrows, and bullocks groaned beneath the heavy yoke.

In the Silver Age, after the banishment of Saturn (Cronos), Jove (Zeus) created the seasons. The consequences of the division of the year in four seasons is for Ovid one of the most important events of the Silver Age, besides the groaning of bullocks beneath the yoke. With the four seasons, a harsh climate arrives, forcing man to build houses for shelter.

Fasti 4.400: Afterwards the acorn became known; it was well when they had found the acorn, and the sturdy oak afforded a splendid affluence. Ceres was the first who invited man to better sustenance and exchanged acorns for more useful food. She forced bulls to yield their necks to the yoke; then for the first time did the upturned soil behold the sun. [405] Copper was now held in esteem; iron ore still lay concealed; ah would that it had been hidden for ever! Ceres delights in peace ...

Ceres (Demeter), says Ovid, comes during the Silver Age to assist man, and mining begins, revealing metals that should have remained hidden.

Brazen

Metamorphoses 1.125: Next after this and third in order came the brazen race, of sterner disposition, and more ready to fly to arms savage, but not yet impious.

The Brazen Age is briefly described. It is a warlike race, as in Hesiod, "but not yet impious". Ovid reserves impiety for the Iron Race.

Ovid says that Astraea left in the Iron Age whereas Aratus affirms that she could not endure the Brazen Race and left.

Iron

Metamorphoses 1.129: The age of hard iron came last. Straightaway all evil burst forth into this age of baser vein: modesty and truth and faith fled the earth [130] and in their place came tricks and plots and snares, violence and cursed love of gain. Men now spread sails to the winds, though the sailor as yet scarce knew them; and keels of pine which long had stood upon high mountain-sides, now leaped insolently over unknown waves. And the ground, which had hitherto been a common possession [135] like the sunlight and the air, the careful surveyor now marked out with long-drawn boundary-line. Not only did men demand of the bounteous fields the crops and sustenance they owed, [138*]but they delved as well into the very bowels of the earth; and the wealth which the creator had hidden away and buried deep amidst the very Stygian shades, was brought to light, [140] wealth that pricks men on to crime. And now baneful iron had come, and gold more baneful than iron; war came, which fights with both, and brandished in its bloody hands the clashing arms. Men lived on plunder. Guest was not safe from host, [145] nor father-in-law from son-in-law; even among brothers 'twas rare to find affection. The husband longed for the death of his wife, she of her husband; murderous stepmothers brewed deadly poisons, and sons inquired into their fathers' years before the time. Piety lay vanquished, and the maiden Astraea, last of the immortals, abandoned the blood-soaked earth.

*return to sections Technology or Comments on Boethius

The Iron Age of Ovid does not appear to be our own age in the Hesiodian sense. In Hesiod's view, the Iron Age is the present age (when he lived), whereas for Ovid it apparently belongs to the past, having been superseded by other events and races, which, however, are not better than the Iron Age. Thus the attack of the Giants on Heaven belongs to the violent attempts of the Iron Age. But when the Giants were defeated, Mother Earth (Gaia) informed their blood (with which she had been drenched) with life, giving it human form in memory of her former offspring. This is the race—"sons of blood"—to which Lycaon belongs. And it is for his impiety that Zeus resolved to flood the earth.

So the Flood, in Ovid's view, was designed to destroy a race which, coming after the Iron Race, was perhaps even more impious (exemplified in Lycaon as the savage wolf). However, Apollodorus tells us (1.7.2) that the Flood in the age of Deucalion was devised "to destroy the men of the Bronze Age".

In any case, a new race appears when Deucalion and his wife throw the stones that turn into human beings. And that explains, according to Ovid (*Met*.1.414), "the hardness of our race and our endurance of toil". Virgil (*Aeneid* 8.313) makes Evander say that "a race of men sprung from trunks of trees and hardy oak", and Penelope says to Odysseus (Hom.*Od*.19.163): "... tell me of thy stock from whence thou art; for thou art not sprung from an oak of ancient story, or from a stone."

The Art of Love 2.467ff.: First there was a confused mass of things without order, and stars and earth and sea had but one appearance; presently the sky was set over the earth, the land was ringed by the sea, and empty void retired to its own place; the forest received wild beasts to keep, and the air birds; ye lurked, ye fishes, in the liquid waters. Then mankind wandered in the lonely fields; brute strength was theirs and forms uncouth; woodland was their home, their food grass, their bedding leaves; and for long none knew his fellow. Beguiling pleasure is said to have softened those fierce spirits: a man and a woman had tarried together in one spot; what they were to do, they learnt themselves with none to teach them: artlessly did Venus accomplish the sweet act.

Shortly after creation, uncouth mankind wanders with "brute strength" until the pleasure of love softened the "fierce spirits" of the time. No doubt, this is a first race, and yet its men do not resemble those of the Golden Age, described elsewhere by the same Ovid. We are back in the "savage state" of Cole.

In this account, men and women make love like animals, but later Apollo instructs them to love with wisdom: "only he who knows himself will love with wisdom" [501].

Metamorphoses translated by Frank Justus Miller, LCL 1916; *Amores* translated by Grant Showerman, LCL [1914] 1977; *Fasti* translated by James G. Frazer, LCL 1931

Seneca (5 BC–AD 65)

Hippolytus 525ff.:

It was in such wise, I think, they lived whom the primal age produced, in friendly intercourse with gods. They had no blind love of gold; no sacred boundary-stone, judging between peoples, separated fields on the spreading plain; not yet did rash vessels plough the sea; each man knew only his native waters. Then cities were not surrounded with massive walls, set with many towers; no soldier applied his fierce hand to arms, nor did hurling engines burst through closed gates with heavy stones. Not yet did earth, suffering a master's rule, endure the hard toil of the yoked ox; but the fields fruitful of themselves, fed nations who asked nothing more; the woods gave men their natural wealth, and shady caves afforded natural homes. [540] Unholy passion for gain broke up this peaceful life, headlong wrath, and lust which sets men's hearts aflame. Next came cruel thirst for power; the weaker was made the stronger's prey, and might took the place of right. At first men fought with naked fists, next they turned stones and rough clubs to the use of arms. As yet there was no light cornel-shaft, tipped with tapering iron; no long, sharp-pointed sword hung at the side; no helmets crested with plumes gleamed from afar; rage furnished arms. [550] Warlike Mars invented new modes of strife and thousand forms of death. From this source streams of blood stained all lands and the sea grew red. Then crime stalked unchecked through every home and no impious deed lacked precedent. Brother was slain by brother, father by the hand of son, husband lay dead by the sword of wife, and unnatural mothers destroyed their own offspring [...]

Seneca translated by Frank Justus Miller, LCL 1917

Comments on Seneca

The "blind love of gold" appears as the main cause of decay, the downward steps of which are described, though not identified as sharply defined ages. Nevertheless, the attributes of the Golden Age are evident at the beginning of the passage: intercourse with gods, no divisions of the land, wealth provided by the unforced earth, etc. No ships, no houses, no walls, no towers, and no closed gates were the guarantee of a peaceful life. For in the trail of such technologies come the engines of war.

See the similarities between the gradual steps of violence described by Seneca (from 540), and the account offered by Erasmus in his *Adages* (see note 5).

Statius (c.AD 48–96)

Silvae 1.4.2, 1.6.39–50

Silvae 1.4.2: "... kindly Astraea hath regard for pious folk, and comes back reconciled with Jove."

Silvae 1.6.39–50: Come now, Antiquity, compare with ours the age of primeval Jove and the times of gold: less bounteously then did the vintage flow, not thus did the harvest anticipate the tardy year. One table serves every class alike, children, women, people, knights, and senators: freedom has loosened the bonds of awe. Nay even thyself—what god could have such leisure, or vouchsafe as much?—thou didst come and share our banquet. And now everyone, be he rich or poor, boasts himself the Emperor's guest.

Statius translated by J. H. Mozley, LCL 1928

Comments on Statius

Astraea comes back in a figurative manner. The poet rejoices as a friend recovers from sickness. Astraea (Justice) has left the earth, as narrated by Aratus and others. In *Silvae* 5.3.89, the poet exclaims: "... let Pity that has forgotten men, and Justice recalled to heaven ..." Yet, it is the earth, and not heaven, that Astraea has left.

In the second fragment from the *Kalendae Decembres*, the enthusiasm of the poet for the celebration of the Saturnalia appears to turn simple guts into a heart, as the Saturnalia surpasses, in his praise, the Golden Age itself.

Hyginus (c. AD 200)

Astronomica 2.25

VIRGIN (VIRGO)

Hesiod calls her the daughter of Jove and Themis. Aratus says that she is thought to be daughter of Astraeus and Aurora, who lived at the time of the Golden Age of men and was their leader. On account of her carefulness and fairness she was called Justice, and at that time no foreign nations were attacked in war, nor did anyone sail over the seas, but they were wont to live their lives caring for their fields. But those born after their death began to be less observant of duty and more greedy, so that Justice associated more rarely with men. Finally the disease became so extreme that it was said the Brazen Race was born; then she could not endure more, and flew away to the stars.

Others call her Fortune—others, Ceres, and they dispute the more about her because her head is dimly seen. Some have called her Erigone, daughter of Icarius, whom we have spoken of before; others call her a daughter of Apollo by Chrysothemis, an infant, named Parthenos. Because she died young she was put by Apollo among the constellations.

Hyginus translated by Mary Grant, University of Kansas Publications 1960

Comments on Hyginus

Aratus' careful description is here summarized by Hyginus, who, failing to mention the Silver Age, appears to jump from the Golden Age to the Brazen.

The spiritual disease of men seems to have been the main agent in paving the way for the Brazen Race, a corrupted breed that Justice could not endure.

Dike (Astraea) is the daughter of Zeus and Themis (Hes.*The*.902), or else as Aratus and Hyginus say, the daughter of Astraeus and Aurora (Eos). Both Astraeus and Eos are children of Titans.

Fortune is Tyche (one of the Oceanids), and Ceres is Demeter.

Erigone's father Icarius received from Dionysus a branch of a vine, and learned from him the process of making wine, but he was killed by some shepherds, who, having drunk of his wine, imagined they were bewitched. Erigone hanged herself when she discovered her father's death, but both were made immortal.

Diodorus (5.62.3) says that Parthenos' father was Staphylus, son of Ariadne.

Aelian (c.AD 170–235)

Varia Historia 3.18

He said there were two big cities, not at all like each other, one called Warlike and the other Pious. The inhabitants of Pious live in peace and with great wealth; they obtain the fruits of the earth without the plough and oxen, and they have no need to farm and cultivate. They remain healthy and free of disease, he said, and end their lives full of laughter and contented. They are indisputably just, so that even the gods frequently deign to visit them. The citizens of Warlike are for their part very bellicose; they are born with weapons, they are always fighting, and they subdue their neighbours; this one city controls a great many nations. The inhabitants are not less than twenty million. Sometimes they die of illness, but this is rare, since for the most part they lose their lives in battle, wounded by stones or wooden clubs (they cannot be harmed by iron). They have an abundance of gold and silver, so that to them gold is of less value than iron is to us. He said they had once tried to cross over to these islands of ours, and sailed over the ocean with a force of ten million until they reached the Hyperboreans. Learning that the latter were the richest of our peoples, they felt contempt for them as inferior beings of lowly fortunes, and for that reason dismissed the idea of traveling further.

Aelian translated by N. G. Wilson, LCL 1997

Comments on Aelian

"He" is Silenus, who tells this tale to King Midas when they met. These cities are in a continent beyond the ocean.

This is not an account of the Ages, but, like the myth of the Islands of the Blest, it is reminiscent of them, several features being here evoked:

The city of Pious appears inhabited by a Golden Race able to obtain the fruits of the earth without the plough and the oxen, or without forcing her in any way. They enjoy freedom from disease, and like the Golden Race, they have intercourse with the gods while justice and happiness reign among them.

The citizens of Warlike are like a Brazen or Iron Race. But the "love of gain" of this bellicose race is illustrated in another manner: the abundance of gold leads to both devaluation and despondence. Gold has no value and no one is rich enough to be plundered. Their invasion of "these islands of ours" (i.e. Europe, Asia, and Africa) is reminiscent of the war that, according to Plato (see Pla.*Tim*.24E–25D; Pla.*Cri*.108Eff.), Atlantis waged against the Mediterranean world.

Boethius (AD 480–524)

The Consolation of Philosophy 2.5:

FELIX NIMIUM PRIOR AETAS

How happy was that earlier age
When men content depended on the trusty land,
And not yet sunk in idle luxury
Sated their hunger only at their need
With acorns gathered with ease.
They had not learn to mix
Wine with clear honey;
Nor to dye shining silken stuffs
With Tyrian purple.
The greensward gave them healthy sleep,
The gliding river water for their thirst,
And the tall pine a shadow from the sun.
Not yet did they cut deep waters with their ships,
Nor seeking trade abroad
Stand strangers on a unknown shore.
There was no sound of savage bugle-calls,
Nor had men's blood been shed in bitter hate
Staining the scrubby fields.
For why should any man in furious enmity
Want to strike first
When he could see what cruel wounds would come
With no reward for blood?

Comments on Boethius

In this description, the happiness of the first age (Golden) rests, as in other accounts, on the simplicity of countryside life. Nature provides without being forced if men let themselves be ruled by their needs instead of their greed. Ships, trade, and colonization are condemned. They lead to war and bloody savagery. Those who, looking for wealth, delve "into the very bowels of the earth" (Ov.*Met*.1.138) are equally condemned.

Would that our present times
Would now return to those good ancient days!
But fiercer now than Etna's fires
Burns the hot lust for gain.
Ah who was he
Who first dug out those perilous things—
Nuggets of gold, which had lain concealed,
And gems, far better hid?

Boethius translated by S. J. Tester, LCL [1918] 1973

Index of proper names in the Ancient Texts:

Characters: Aeneas, Aidôs (Reverence), Apollo, Ares, Astraea (Dike), Astraeus, Atreus, Aurora (Eos), Bootes, Cadmus, Ceres (Demeter), Chrysothemis, Cronos, Deucalion, Envy, Erigone, Evander, Fauns (Satyrs), Fortune (Tyche), Helen, Icarius, Jove (Zeus), Jupiter (Zeus), Justice (Dike), Lucina (Artemis), Maiden (Dike), Mars (Ares), Nemesis, Nymphs, Oedipus, Parthenos, Saturn (Cronos), Socrates, Themis, Thyestes, Titans, Venus (Aphrodite), Virgin (Dike), VIRGO (Dike), Zeus.

Places: Cretan (of Crete), Cumae, Dodona, Etna, Halicarnassus, Italy, Latium, Olympus, Rome, Stygian (of the river Styx), Thebes, Troy, Tyrian (of Tyros).
See also Dictionary.

III. The Ages of Man

I. The Ages of the World II. Ancient Texts III. The Ages of Man IV. Notes V. Bibliography

Six Pictorial Examples

Hans Baldung Grien, *The 3 Ages and Death*, and *The Seven Ages of Woman*

Gustav Klimt, *The Three Ages of Woman*

Edvard Munch, *Four Ages in Life*

Giorgione, *The Three Ages of Man*

Valentin de Boulogne, *The Four Ages of Man*

The invention or discovery of the Races/Ages has not been traced, but when their number is four, they coincide with the hours of the day, the phases of the moon, the seasons of the year, the four elements, and the ages of man.

For example Florus (2nd century historian) applies the four ages of man to the development of a single civilization, describing the course of Empire as follows:

"If we consider the Roman people as a man, and reflect on the whole course of its life—its birth, its growth, its prime, and its old age—we shall find that it passed through four stages. The first, under the Kings, lasted for 400 years, during which Rome struggled with its own neighbours. This was its infancy. The next age lasted from the Consulship of Brutus and Collatinus to the Consulship of Appius Claudius and Quintus Fulvius—150 years, in which Italy was subdued. This was a time full of virile and martial energy and might be called Rome's youth. Next come 150 years until Augustus, during which Rome subdued the whole world. This was the early manhood of the nation, the prime and flower of its life. From Augustus to the present age are almost two hundred years, in which the idleness of the Emperors has withered the Empire in old age." [1.1]

Author/Artist	No. Ages
The Sphinx (mythical)	3
Pythagoras (c. 570-497 BC)	4
Ovid (43 BC - AD 17)	4
Ptolemy (c. AD 100-178)	4 and 7
St. Augustin (354-430)	6
Dante Alighieri (1265-1321)	4
Giorgione (1477-1510)	3
Hans Baldung Grien (1484-1545)	3 and 7
Dosso Dossi (1489-1542)	3
Titian (1490-1576)	3
William Shakespeare (1564-1616)	7
Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844)	4
Thomas Cole (1801-48)	4
Gustav Klimt (1862-1918)	3
Edvard Munch (1863-1944)	4
Salvador Dalí (1904-89)	3

Florus is not affected by other numbers that civil life established in Roman society, but keeps the division of the four traditional phases at the hour of establishing a diagnosis of Rome's condition.

The number of Ages of Man varies. For example St. Augustin (354-430) raised the number of ages to six, both for man and for the world: Infancy, Childhood (c. 6 to 13), Adolescence, Youth, Maturity, and Old Age correspond to the Ages of the World, which cannot be distinguished by simple observation or in a natural way, requiring instead theological training: 1) From Adam to Noah; 2) From Noah to Abraham; 3) From Abraham to David; 4) From David to the Deportation in Babylon; 5) From the Deportation in Babylon to the coming of the Lord; 6) From the coming of the Lord to the end of the world.[9]

But for the purpose of this article, only the outlooks of the three, four, and seven ages will be briefly examined.

Three Ages

Titian 1490-1576: *The Three Ages*

The notion of the three ages of man seems to derive from a dynamic assessment: forces either increment, or are stable, or else decrease. From this point of view, there cannot be difference between Childhood and Youth because both increase. And once the stable point of Prime has been passed, there is no significant difference between Older manhood and Old Age since both represent decrease.

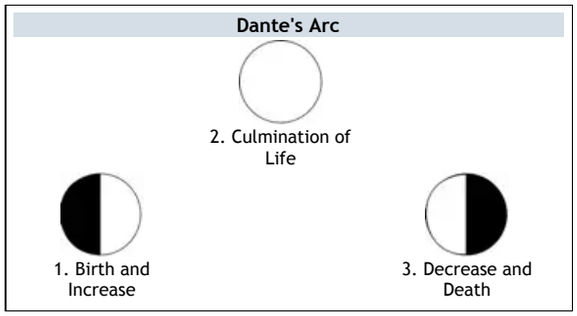
For the Sphinx there were three ages, as it may be derived from her riddle:

"What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?" (Apollodorus, *Library* 3.5.7).

And also Aristotle (384-322 BC) tells us that the life of man can be divided into three phases: youth, prime, and old age. But then no one should be surprised by this philosopher's choice since his preference divided many other things into three as well. To see some of them, read this note: [10].

Dante affirms that human life takes the likeness of an arc (the form of the heavens as seen by man), rising upward and descending:

"Consequently since our life, as has been said, and the life of every living thing here below is caused by heaven, and heaven discloses itself to all such effects as these not by a complete circling but by a partial circling—and thus its movement above them must necessarily rise somewhat like an arc—all earthly life (and in saying "earthly" I mean both men and the other forms of life), rising upward and descending, must be similar to the image of an arc. Returning, then, to human life, which is our sole concern at present, I say that it takes the likeness of this arc, rising upward and descending." (*Convivio* IV. xxiii. 6).

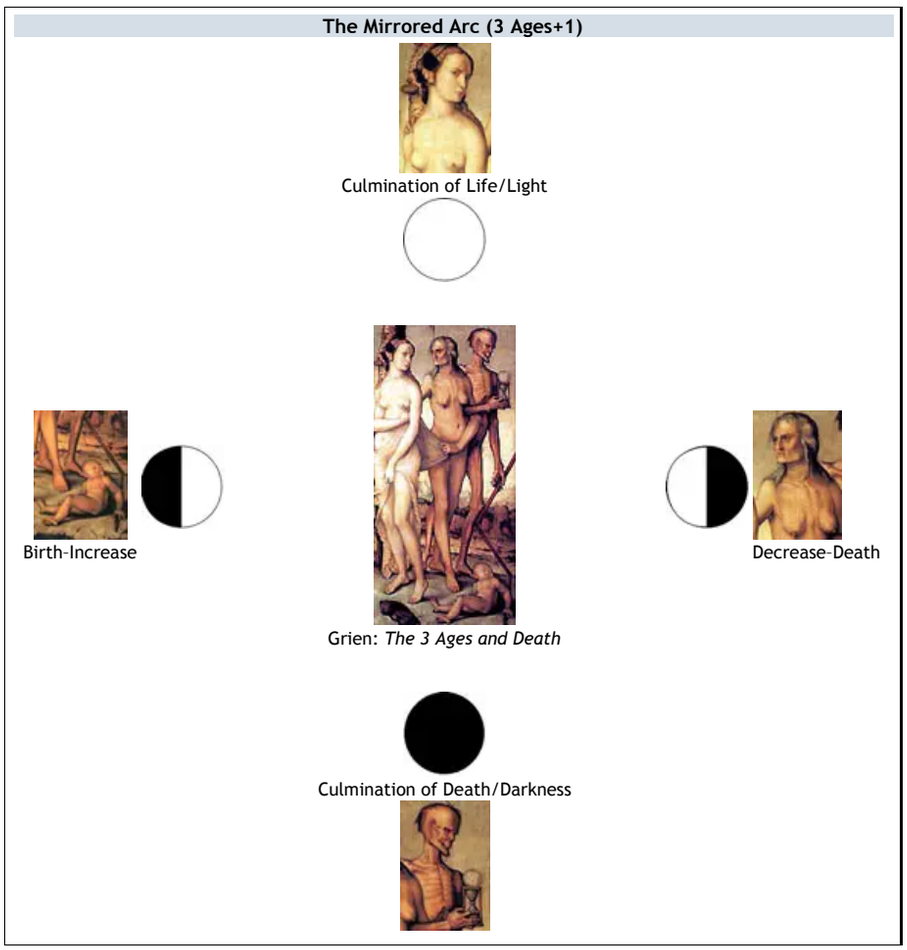


These are only two movements, sufficient for originating ages but not for defining them. However, it is noticed that if such an arc were a bow, then three sections could be distinguished: two bending, and one firm in the middle (or bending imperceptibly). And this middle part, which neither rises nor descends would then be the Prime of man:

"... ascent and descent are like the handle of a bow in which but little flection is observed." (*Convivio* IV. xxiv. 3).

In the "three-ages notion," the main three stages of development (increment-culmination-decrease) are found along Dante's arc. Between birth and death (both of which coincide with the horizon of our perception), the life of man increases, culminates, and decreases. Using Dante's arc, we would then get:

But the four-ages view, though it does not contradict that description, attempts to describe the complete circle or cycle, taking into account the unseen arc—the half below the horizon. For that purpose, it must add yet a phase, and arrange the stages thus (clockwise to keep left-to-right order):

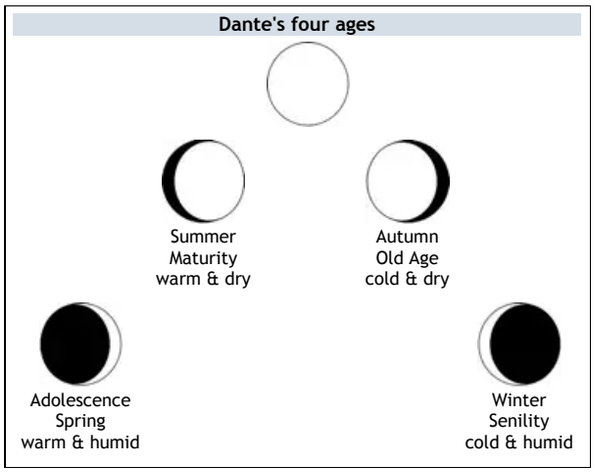


So it could be said that whereas the three ages view emphasizes the three stages (increment-culmination-decrease) derived from the movements of rising and descending along an arc, the four ages view rather describes the stations created by those same movements along a complete circle, thus obtaining two middle points instead of one. As it is immediately noticed, the two halves of the circle appear reversed as in a mirror, one half looking as the photographic negative of the other.

Four Ages

The 3+1 phases illustrated by Grien, however, may also be applied to the visible world alone, since the same principle that rules the circle is thought to govern each half as well, and in the same manner. Discarding what is below the horizon (or "mirrored arc"), Dante divides the life of man into four ages:

This arc, however, is not characterized in written works solely by reference to its midpoint, but is divided into four parts, according to the four combinations of the contrary qualities that comprise our composition, to which combinations—I mean to each individually—one part of the course of our life seems to correspond, and these are called the four ages. The first is adolescence, which corresponds to the hot and moist; the second is maturity, which corresponds to the hot and dry; the third is old age, which corresponds to the cold and dry; and the fourth is senility, which corresponds to the dry and moist [...] These parts of life are likewise characterized by the year, by spring, summer, autumn, and winter; and by the day ..." (Dante, *Convivio* IV.xxiii.12).



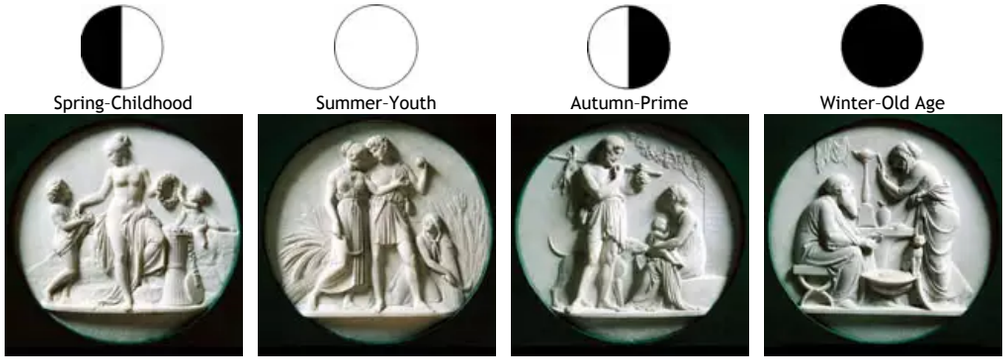
And since he regards culmination not as a segment but as a point, his arc may be arranged thus (the midpoint having no relevant duration):

Dante appears to find a confirmation of the fourfold structure of the day in the four horses of Helius, named by Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2.153: Pyrois (Fiery), Eous (Orient), Aethon (Blazing) and Phlegon (Flaming). Hyginus provides another list:

"Eous; by him the sky is turned. Aethiops, as if flaming, parches the grain. These trace-horses are male. The female are yoke-bearers: Bronte, whom we call Thunder, Sterope, whom we call Lightning ..." (*Fab*.183).

More familiar is the following Spring Arrangement (applicable to the segment of life, upper half of the circle, or arc), supported by Pythagoras, Ovid, Ptolemy, and Thorvaldsen:

Spring Arrangement (4 Ages)



Reliefs by Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1770–1844: *The Ages of Man and the Seasons*

The notion of the four ages of man attempts to reflect the moods of each period by affiliating itself with known cycles: the hours of the day, the phases of the moon, the seasons of the year, the four elements, and the ages of the world. For example Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.186ff., begins by describing the shades and lights of the day:

"You see how the spent nights speed on to dawn and how the sun's bright rays succeed darkness of the night. Nor have the heavens the same appearance when all things, wearied with toil, lie at rest at midnight and when bright Lucifer comes out on his snowy steed; there is still another aspect when Pallantias [Aurora], herald of the morning, stains the sky bright for Phoebus' coming. The god's round shield itself is red in the morning when it rises from beneath the earth and is red when it is hidden beneath the earth again; but in its zenith it is white [...]"

Then he continues with the phases of the moon at night:

[196] "Nor has Diana, goddess of the night, the same phase always. She is less today than she will be tomorrow if she is waxing, but greater if she is waning."

Then with the seasons, associating them with the ages of man:

[199] "Then again, do you not see the year assuming four aspects, in imitation of our own lifetime? For in early spring it is tender and full of fresh life, just like a little child [...] After spring has passed, the year, grown more sturdy, passes into summer and becomes like a strong young man [...] Then autumn comes, with its first flush of youth gone, but ripe and mellow, midway in time between youth and age, with sprinkled grey showing on the temples. And then comes aged winter, with faltering step and shivering, its locks all gone or hoary."

And having described the alternation of the four elements, Ovid defines birth and death as phases among others:

[255] "What we call birth is but a beginning to be other than what one was before; and death is but cessation of a former state."

After contemplating the many faces of change, he also writes:

[259] "Nothing, I feel sure, lasts long under the same appearance. Thus the ages have come from gold to iron ..."

In his art, the Danish sculptor Thorvaldsen has found Love, if not revealing, at least highly inspiring. The *four corners of the world* could be the cardinal points, or else those depicted by Thorvaldsen, which are found to be related to the Four Elements (Fire-Air-Water-Earth) of Empedocles (c. 495-435 BC):

"[...] fire and water and earth [...] and air [...] and Love among them [...]" [B17]

Cupid in four corners of the world

In Heaven | On Earth | At Sea | In the Underworld

Reliefs by Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1770–1844

Cupid (Love) is seen with the thunderbolt of Zeus, the club of Heracles, the trident of Poseidon, and the pitchfork of Hades. Apparently, Thorvaldsen associated fire with the Underworld, and not with the Empyrean Heaven. Then again in *The Ages of Love*, Thorvaldsen shows how love (or a certain aspect of love) is first adored, then cherished, later treated with indifference, and finally lost, as age advances.

Cycles are founded on the alternation of two equal principles, each of which shows—by their rising and descending—a development similar to that revealed by the three ages view (increment, culmination, and decrease). In cycles such as the hours of the day, the phases of the moon, or the seasons of the year, the principles are Light and Darkness. They rise and descend, and their interplay yields, at any time, one of these four basic stages: (1) Light is surpassed by Darkness, or (2) it surpasses Darkness, or (3) both are equal. But since the "equal" phase appears in two forms (either with Light increasing, or else decreasing), then a total of four phases is obtained. Dawn and Dusk, for example, are the same but reversed: during the former Light increases, and during the latter Darkness does.

The principles steering life do not need to be identified here, for any pair having the characteristics of light/darkness, warmth/cold, etc. would do. But regarding the life of man as a cycle implies the acceptance of the idea of rebirth, reincarnation, or metempsychosis (transmigration of the soul); for what is meant by these analogies is simply this: "Just as the seasons return, or the light of day, or a new moon, so will the life of any man start again after his death." For example Ovid makes Pythagoras say:

"Our souls are deathless, and ever, when they have left their former seat, do they live in new abodes and dwell in the bodies that have received them." (*Metamorphoses* 15.158ff.).

The cyclic notion may then be analogically applied to the ages of the world, or even to a single civilization—as in Florus' diagnosis. For it is sensed that the same pattern could operate in larger as well as smaller scales (if proportions are kept). Yet, when the ages of man are divided into four, both their length and the way they are organized vary—sometimes Old Age is The Autumn of Life, and at other times The Winter of Life.

Bertel Thorvaldsen, 1770–1844: *The Ages of Love*

Dante assigns 25 years to adolescence, 20 to maturity, 25 to old age, and c. 10 years to senility:

"... if the highest point of our arc is in the thirty-fifth year, this age of life must have a descent and an ascent of equal duration; this ascent and descent are like the handle of a bow in which but little flection is observed. It obtains, then, that maturity is completed in the forty-fifth year. Just as adolescence lasts for the first twenty-five years, ascending toward maturity, so the descent, that is, old age, lasts for the same number of years following maturity; and so old age concludes in the seventieth year." (*Convivio* IV. xxiv. 3).

But Pythagoras assigns 20 years to each age. The divisions made by three authors are combined in the table below:

In the four reliefs called *The Ages of Man and the Seasons*, Thorvaldsen combines the Ages of Man with their corresponding Seasons, associating Childhood to Spring, Youth to Summer, Manhood to Autumn, and Old Age to Winter. This is also the Pythagorean arrangement, as recorded by Diogenes Laertius (and by Diodorus 10.9.5):

"He [Pythagoras] divides man's life into four quarters thus: 'Twenty years a boy, twenty years a youth, twenty years a young man, twenty years an old man; and these four periods correspond to the four seasons, the boy to spring, the youth to summer, the young man to autumn, and the old man to winter,' meaning by youth one not yet grown up and by a young man a man of mature age." (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* VIII. 10).

Ages	Ptolemy	Pythagoras	Dante
Infancy	4 years	20 years	25 years
Childhood	10 years		
Youth	8 years	20 years	
Younger Manhood	19 years	20 years	20 years
Older Manhood	15 years		
Elderly Age	12 years	20 years	25 years
Old Age	68 to end		c. 10 years

Also Ptolemy (Claudius Ptolemy, c. AD 100-178), the author of *Tetrabiblos*) counted four ages. He assigned Childhood to Spring because both have a larger share of moisture, being tender and delicate. Youth he associated with Summer because both exceed in heat. Past the Prime is the third age, having an excess of dryness and being on the verge of decline, like Autumn. Finally is Old Age, approaching dissolution and exceeding in coldness, like Winter (*Tetrabiblos* 1.10). Yet, Ptolemy counted Seven Ages as well (see below).

François de Maynard (1582-1646)—like Ptolemy, Pythagoras (570-497 BC), or Thorvaldsen—uses Winter as a metaphor for Old Age in his *La Belle Vieille*:

"Et l'hyver de ta vie est ton second printemps." (And the winter of your life is your second spring.)

But being in love with this old lady, Maynard cannot mean by *printemps* her Childhood but rather her Youth. Yet when Old Age is Winter, Spring must be Childhood, which suggests that poets do not always need to be too strict at the hour of choosing their metaphors.

And Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-1672) writes in her *The Four Ages of Man*:

> Childhood was cloth'd in white, and given to show,
> His spring was intermixed with some snow.

... telling of Maturity:

> Of Autumn fruits a basket on his arm,

... which also leaves Winter to Old Age.

Likewise the Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759-96) writes in his *The Winter of Life*:

> My trunk of eild [old age], but buss [bush] or beild [shelter],
> Sinks in Time's wintry rage.

But Thorvaldsen's fellow countryman, the Danish mystic Martinus Thomsen (1890-1981), has argued, in his extensive and complex cosmology (*Livets bog* III.643 *et seq*.), that to Winter corresponds Childhood, to Spring Youth, to Summer Prime, and to Autumn Old Age. In his view, to be half-child/half-adult (Youth) coincides with the vernal point, that is, with the Spring equinox:

Therefore Childhood, he concludes, is the winter of life when only elementary life-forms can develop. Childhood is seen as a winter seed germinating in the darkness, as also Ovid says:

"There was a time when we lay in our first mother's womb, mere seeds and hopes of men." (Ov.*Met*.15.216).

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), in his Sonnet 73, appears to employ late Autumn as a metaphor for Old Age:

> "That time of year thou mayest in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang"[11]

... although he also says "or none", referring to the leaves.

And Charles E. Myers (1902-83) sings in *The Autumn of Life*:

> The spring of youth has long departed;
> The summer of life is nearing its end.
> I am entering the beautiful Autumn
> That climaxes life for fortunate men

In the table below, the correspondences (for example between the phases of the moon and the hours of the day) are to be taken analogically, and not in any other way, since the table shows the similarities that have been observed in different cycles. The whole period of 24 hours is naturally divided into two: Day and Night—Light prevailing in the former and Darkness in the latter. The amount of light and of darkness are finally the same. Accordingly, Day and Night are regarded as equals

> "... night's sightless eye, and radiant sun proceed upon their yearly course on equal terms and neither of them is envious when it has to yield." (Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 543).

... but they are in equilibrium only at the time of the equinoxes when light and darkness are of equal duration. For the Romans and others the "temporal" hours of the day were ideally five (Prima, Tertia, Sexta, Nona, and Duodecima or Vespero, as Dante says). These hours are 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18 (in a 24 hours system), and in the table they fall on lines, not on periods. From columns 3 through 6 are the hours of the day; the others belong to the night, but a man is awake for 2/3 of a 24 hours period. Soldiers divide night in four periods of three hours each, keeping vigil over nocturnal dangers.

This time the table shows Old Age as The Autumn of Life:

Winter arrangement (4 ages)							
1. dark	2. dark	3. dark/light	4. light	5. light	6. light	7. light/dark	8. dark
New Moon	Waxing crescent	First quarter	Waxing gibbous	Full Moon	Waning gibbous	Last quarter	Waning crescent
		Prima	Tertia	Sexta	Nona	Duodecima	
3° vigilia	4° vigilia					1° vigilia	2° vigilia
Night	Dawn	Morning	Before Noon	Noon	After Noon	Twilight	Dusk
Night		Morning		Noon		Evening	
Solstice		Equinox		Solstice		Equinox	
Winter		Spring		Summer		Autumn	

Childhood	Youth	Prime	Old Age

In these engravings by William Hogarth (1697–1764), the four times of the day are depicted (enlarged, described, and commented at Hayley & Steele). Fires are still burning in the *Morning* which is not as bright as it may sound (the tones of *Evening* are brighter).

Seven Ages

The Seven Ages of Man. From a French Almanack published in Paris by Petit in 1525. The characters build a circle, the old man being close to the baby in the cradle.

William Shakespeare made the seven ages of man widely known, having described them in his *As You Like It* 2.7 [12] These have been humorously illustrated by H. Alkin (1824) and William Mulready (1838). In this external link, two medieval images illustrating the idea of the seven ages are displayed.

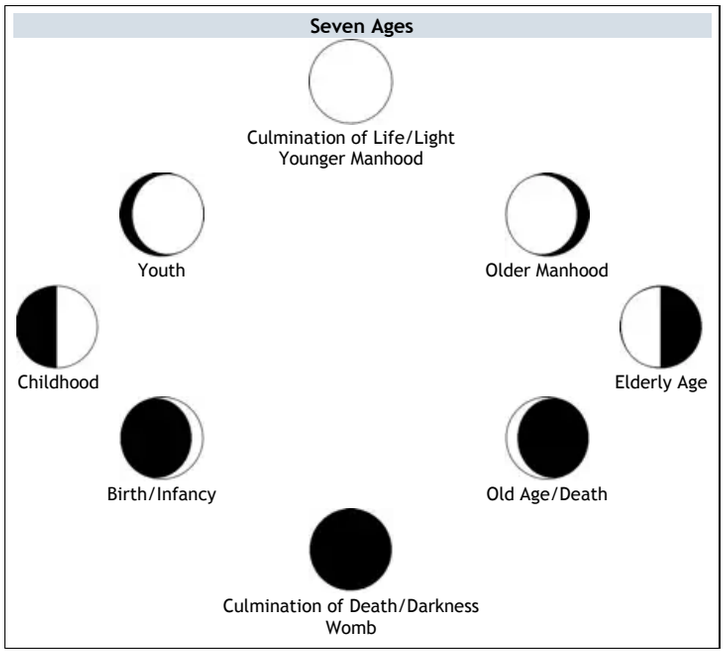
Ptolemy, whom we have seen counting four ages, also divided the ages of man into seven periods (*Tetrabiblos* 4.10.205), associating them with the planets (since this author is a pioneer of Astrology).

Age	Duration in years	Planet
Infancy	0-4 (4 years)	Moon
Childhood	4-14 (10 years)	Mercury
Youth	14-22 (8 years)	Venus
Younger Manhood	22-41 (19 years)	Sun
Older Manhood	41-56 (15 years)	Mars
Elderly Age	56-68 (12 years)	Jupiter
Old Age	68 to end	Saturn

The contemporary notion that in antiquity Old Age started considerably earlier than in our days (AD 2004) is neither confirmed by Pythagoras (see above) nor by Ptolemy's perception:

The visible and invisible worlds of Life and Death—above illustrated as "The Mirrored Arc"—may again be combined with the help of the "Seven Ages of Man" described by Ptolemy, Grien, Shakespeare and others.

It will be noticed that Grien painted both three and seven ages, and that Ptolemy described both four and seven ages. The discrepancy in Ptolemy has puzzled some scholars, who have feared interpolations written by another hand. But as we see these discrepancies could be more apparent than real. Ptolemy gives detailed descriptions of the character and conditions of each age, as does—in his celebrated way—William Shakespeare. Here is a comparative table:



Ages	Ptolemy	Shakespeare
Infancy	Supple and lack of body fixity, quick growth, moist food, changeable, imperfect, inarticulate	Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
Childhood	Develops articulation, intelligence, logical parts, learning, character, and faculties through instruction.	And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel And shining morning face, creeping like snail Unwillingly to school.
Youth	Frenzy impulse toward love, burning passion, chance sexual gratification, guile, blindness of the impetuous lover.	And then the lover, Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad Made to his mistress' eyebrow.
Younger Manhood	Mastery of his actions, desire for substance, glory, and position. Playfulness turns into seriousness, decorum, and ambition.	Then a soldier, Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel, Seeking the bubble reputation Even in the cannon's mouth.
Older Manhood	Introduces severity and misery into his life, implanting cares and troubles, and redoubling labor to accomplish something worthy of note.	And then the justice, In fair round belly with good capon lined, With eyes severe and beard of formal cut, Full of wise saws and modern instances;

Elderly Age	Renunciation of manual labour, toil, turmoil, and dangerous activity. Comes decorum, foresight, retirement, deliberation, admonition, and consolation.	The sixth age shifts Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon, With spectacles on nose and pouch on side, His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice, Turning again toward childish treble, pipes And whistles in his sound.
Old Age	The cooled movements are impeded in their impulses, enjoyments, desires, and speed. The worn down life becomes dispirited, weak, easily offended, and hard to please.	Last scene of all, That ends this strange eventful history, Is second childishness and mere oblivion, Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

IV. Notes

[1] Still geological ages are sketched by Ovid: "I have myself seen what once was solid land changed into sea; and again I have seen land made from the sea. Sea-shells have been seen lying far from the ocean, and an ancient anchor has been found on a mountain-top ..." (*Metamorphoses*, 15.260ff.).

[2] Later times came to believe that mankind polishes its humanity as it perfects its machinery. The miracles of science and technology made appear the poets of the past and the past itself as "primitive" since the degree of man's evolution came to be judged by the smartness of his technical devices, despite their destructivity. The opposite view was held by the ancients, who regarded technical progress as a symptom of spiritual decay. Sailing on the wave of enthusiasm, however, the new prophets offered an even more unlikely alternative: they placed the Golden Age not in the past but in the future. So, for example, and among many others, Henri Saint Simon (1760–1825):

> "L'imagination des poètes a placé l'âge d'or au berceau de l'espèce humaine parmi l'ignorance et la grossièreté des premiers temps; c'était bien plutôt l'âge de fer qu'il fallait y reléguer. L'âge d'or du genre humain n'est point derrière nous, il est au-devant, il est dans la perfection de l'ordre social; nos pères ne l'ont point vu, nos enfants y arriveront un jour." (*Réorganisation de la société européenne*).

Confusing the metals and their qualities did not prevent Saint Simon from predicting developments. But for the ancient mind, his futuristic naïveté would have probably appeared as yet another evidence of the senility of the race (as when the old man believes he is a child). And indeed, since the time of Saint Simon history has seen destructivity grow to such heights that, as they also say of Discord, she reaches heaven with her head while having her feet still on the ground—and not seldom in the name of some future golden age.

[3] Innocence, you the holy, dearest and nearest
Both to men and to gods! In the house or
Out of doors alike to sit at the ancients'
Feet it behoves you,
Ever contented wisdom yours ... (Friedrich Hölderlin, *Unter den Alpen gesungen*).

[4] Hipparchus (c. 190–120 BC) is said to have discovered the precession of the equinoxes. Astronomers explain that the annual course of the sun, should bring it at each season—and particularly at the equinoxes which may be observed with more exactitude—to a certain zodiacal point. However, the sun is found on another point, moving along the zodiacal circumference. The astronomers explain that this is due to the instability of the earth's axis which causes the celestial equator to shift so that the point of intersection between it and the ecliptic—the vernal equinox—moves along the ecliptic. See, for example David P. Stern's *From Stargazers to Starships*, Imago Mundi: la précession solaire, Racines et Traditions en Pays d'Europe: Précession, Durée de la Grande Année ou "année platonicienne", Starlink Project: Precession and Nutation.

[5] The steps of human violence, according to Erasmus (*Adages*, IV i 1, "Dulce bellum inexpertis" ("War is sweet for those who have not tried it"):

"Long ago [...] when the first primitive men lived in the forests, naked, without fortifications or homes, they were sometimes attacked by savage beasts. It was with these that man first had to go to war, and a man was considered brave and made a leader if he had driven off attacking beasts from his fellows humans. Moreover it seemed entirely just that slayers should be slain and butchers should be butchered, especially when they suffered no harm from us and attacked our kind without provocation. Since such deeds won high praise [...] spirited young people began to hunt wild animals everywhere and to show off the skins as trophies. Then, not content with having killed, they dressed themselves in the skins against the cold of winter. Such were the first murders and the first spoils.
After this they went further and dared to do a thing which Pythagoras deemed thoroughly wicked and which might seem unthinkable to us if custom did not tell us otherwise [...] they did not shrink from taking the carcasses of slain animals for food, to tear dead flesh with their teeth, to drink the blood and suck the juices, 'to stuff their entrails with other entrails' as Ovid says [...] It even became a pleasure to see carcasses served as delicacies [...] And they went further: from dangerous beasts they moved to harmless animals [...] There was a general onslaught on sheep [...] on the hare [...] Nor did they refrain from eating the domestic ox who had supported the ungrateful family for so long with his labours; no species of bird or fish was spared, and this tyranny of greed reached the point that no animal was ever safe from the cruelty of man."

The step from killing animals to war is explained by Erasmus as follows:

[...] After they had had some practice in killing with these beginning, anger convinced them that man should assault man with clubs or stones, or their fists. But this kind of barbarity remained for a long time a matter of fighting between individuals [...] Moreover there was some appearance of right in having stood up to an enemy, and it began to be a matter for praise if one killed some violent or pernicious man, such as Cacus and Busiris [...] The next step was that numbers of people banded together according to kinship, neighbourhood, or close connection, and what is now called brigandage was then called war [...] Meanwhile, as savagery increased with habit, as anger rose and ambition became more and more inflamed, ingenuity provided weapons to match their violence. Men invented arms to defend themselves and missiles to destroy the enemy [...] they sought to make it a virtue if a man defended children, wife, herds, or places of retreat from enemy attacks at the risk of his own life. And so malice grew gradually side by side with civilization; city began to declare war on city, region on region, kingdom on kingdom.

From bravery to trickery and orgy of killing:

[...] there still remained at this time [...] traces of the humanity of the earliest times [...] The battle was fought with ordinary weapons, and courage, not trickery. It was a crime to strike the enemy if the signal for battle had not been given.
[...] And as yet there was no resort to arms except against foreigners [...] From these beginnings empires were born—an no nation ever achieved empire without great shedding of human blood [...] Subsequently, as power had fallen into the hands of the most criminal sorts of mortals, armed attacks were made on anybody at will [...] And men are so blind in their thinking that no one is surprised at this, no one denounces it. There are some who applaud it, make a glorious parade of it, call it 'holy' when it is worse than hellish [...]

[6] Dante, *Inf*. V, 121:

"There is no greater sorrow
Than to be mindful of the happy time
In misery..."

[7] For example, Apollodorus 1.7.1, and Pausanias 10.4.4. Ovid, in *Met*.1.82ff., adheres to this version with some reservations, but at the moment of describing the different ages, he is not explicit ("Golden was that first age", "the silver race came in", "next ... came the brazen age", "the age of hard iron came last"). Likewise, Ovid does not explain how the Golden Age died out, although he states that its disappearance coincided with the banishment of Saturn (Cronos), and that under the sway of Jove (Zeus) a lower race (Silver) was born. Ovid does not explain how any of the races disappeared, and—unlike Hesiod—he does not charge any god with their destruction.

[8] Zeus denied fire to a certain Melian race of men (Hes.*The*.563), but Prometheus stole the fire and gave it to mankind. Pandora was sent by Zeus and the other gods as "the price of fire", and as a plague. Some associate the Melian race to the Brazen Race, sprung from ash-trees (Hes.*WD* 145). If that association is correct, then the ills brought about by Pandora and her jar would have fallen not upon the Silver Race but upon the Brazen.

[9] "Ora la fine dei tempi, come la vecchiaia del vecchio uomo – puoi considerare tutto il genere umano come un solo uomo –, è indicata dalla sesta età, in cui è venuto il Signore. Anche nell'uomo individuale sei sono infatti le età: infanzia, fanciullezza, adolescenza, giovinezza, maturità e vecchiaia. La prima età del genere umano va da Adamo a Noè. La seconda da Noè ad Abramo; questi periodi sono evidentissimi e ben noti. La terza da Abramo a Davide: questa è infatti la divisione dell'evangelista Matteo 70. La quarta da Davide alla deportazione di Babilonia. La quinta dalla deportazione di Babilonia alla venuta del Signore. La sesta bisogna protrarla dalla venuta del Signore alla fine del mondo: in questa età, l'uomo esteriore, che si chiama anche uomo vecchio, deperisce per vecchiaia e l'interiore si rinnova di giorno in giorno." (Sant'Agostino, *OTTANTATRE QUESTIONI DIVERSE* 58. – GIOVANNI BATTISTA, 2).

[10] Brief summary of Aristotelian triads:

Three are the conditions of happiness: Wisdom, Goodness, and Pleasure (*Eudemian Ethics* 1214a). Three are the ways of living: the life of politics, that of philosophy, and that of enjoyment (*Eudemian Ethics* 1215a; *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095b). Three the ways of voluntariness: appetition, purposive choice, and thought (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1224a). Three the sorts of friendship: attending goodness, or utility, or pleasure (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1236a *et seq*.). Three the causes of success of the lucky: either nature, or intellect, or guardianship (from above) (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1247a). And concerning contradictions, "there are always three alternatives", for example, greater, smaller, and equal (*Metaphysics* 1056a). Also (and "evidently"), there are three kinds of speculative science: physics, mathematics, and theology (*Metaphysics* 1056a), and three forms of change (*Metaphysics* 1067b) along with three kinds of motion, in respect of quality, quantity, and place (*Metaphysics* 1068a). Similarly, there are three kinds of substance: matter, form, and a given combination of these (*Metaphysics* 1070a), and three principles: form, privation and matter (*Metaphysics* 1070b). Further, the motion of the sun and moon involves three spheres: that of the fixed stars, that revolving in the circle which bisects the zodiac, and that revolving in a circle inclined across the breadth of the zodiac (*Metaphysics* 1073b). Moreover things good have been divided into three: external goods, goods of the soul, and goods of the body (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1098b). And there are three things by which men are made good and virtuous: nature, habit and reason (*Politics* 1332a).

And "There are three things that are the motives of choice and three that are the motives of avoidance; namely, the noble, the expedient, and the pleasant, and their opposites, the base, the harmful, and the painful" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1104b). Likewise, "A state of the soul is either (l) an emotion, (2) a capacity, or (3) a disposition" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1105b). Three are also the dispositions, of which one is the vice of defect, and another is the vice of excess, the third being a virtue consisting in the observance of the mean between the other two (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1108b), and there are also three modes of examining this mean, one concerned with truthfulness and the others with being pleasant (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1128b). Indeed, there are three ways in which a man may injure his fellow: by misadventure, by culpable error, or by an act of injustice (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1135b). And three elements in the soul controlling action and the attainment of truth: Sensation, Intellect, and Desire (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1139a). Similarly, "the states of moral character to be avoided are of three kinds—Vice, Unrestraint, and Bestiality" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1145a). As for friends they do one of three things at a time: they (1) aid the young, (2) tend the elderly, or (3) assist those in the prime of life in noble deeds (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1155a). And lovable things are either good, or pleasant, or useful (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1155b).

There are also three forms of constitution: Kingship, Aristocracy, and Timocracy (this last being "the government by the mass of the citizens, and within the property qualification all are equal"), and three are their perversions: that of Kingship is Tyranny, of Aristocracy Oligarchy, and of Timocracy Democracy (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1160a–1161a). In his *Politics* the right constitutions are three as well, but Aristotle calls them kingship, aristocracy and constitutional government, their deviations being: tyranny from kingship, oligarchy from aristocracy, and democracy from constitutional government (*Politics* 1289a). Three things claim equal participation in the constitution: freedom, wealth, and virtue (*Politics* 1294a). Furthermore, a constitutional government may be obtained by combining democratic and oligarchic elements, but then again there are three principles determining this combination (*Politics* 1294a). Yet, whatever the constitution, there exist three divisions: the very rich, the very poor, and those in between (*Politics* 1295b). And a good legislator or lawgiver should refer to three factors when considering constitutional expediency: one is concerned with the nature of the body deliberating on common interest, another with the magistracies (what matters magistrates control and how they are elected), and a third with the judiciary (*Politics* 1298a). And three determinants are involved when electing magistrates: who elects, from whom (from which class), and in what manner. Each determinant has three variations: (1) either all appoint or some, (2) either from all or from a certain class, (3) either by vote or by lot. (*Politics* 1300a). Then, party factions and revolutions have three causes or origins: a certain state of feeling concerning equality and inequality, to obtain gain and honor or else avoid dishonor and loss, the causes themselves arising those feelings and advising that struggle (these could be many in number, says Aristotle, *Politics* 1302a. The magistrates should possess three qualities: loyalty to the constitution, great capacity to do the duties of the office, and virtue and justice (*Politics* 1309a). Now Tyranny aims at three things: to keep its subjects humble, to have them continually distrust one another, and to ensure their lack of power for political action (*Politics* 1314a).

There are many forms of Poetry, but three are the differences "which form the several species of the art of representation, the means, the objects, and the manner" (*Poetics* 1447a–1448a). And Tragedy has three elements: reversal, discovery, and calamity (*Poetics* 1452b). The poet represents three aspects of life: things as they were or are, things as they are said and seem to be; or things as they should be (*Poetics* 1460b).

And the primary and smallest parts of the household are also three: master and slave, husband and wife, and father and children (*Politics* 1253b). Commerce has three departments: ship-owning, transport and marketing (*Politics* 1258b). Systems of property are three: either common property of everything, or nothing is owned in common, or some things are common property and others not (*Politics* 1260b). Wrong is done for three reasons: for the bare necessities, to gain pleasures not associated with pains, or to satisfy desires above the bare necessities (*Politics* 1267a). Aristotle describes the city system of Hippodamus, also a lover of triads; in it three classes are distinguished: the artisans, the farmers, and the armed class (soldiers); the land is divided into three parts, one sacred, one public and one private; and the law is also divided into three since there are just three transgressions: outrage, damage, and homicide.

Now music could serve three uses: education, amusement and entertainment (*Politics* 1339b). And three canons should guide education: moderation, possibility, and suitability (*Politics* 1342b).

And when it comes to speech, Aristotle says that the proofs furnished by speech are of three kinds: the moral character of the speaker, the ability to put the hearer into a certain frame of mind, and what the speech itself proves or seems to prove (*Rhetoric* 1356a). Also the kinds of Rhetoric are three given that every speech is composed of three parts: the speaker, the subject, and the person to whom it is addressed. Then there are three kinds of rhetorical speeches: deliberative, forensic, and epideictic (*Rhetoric* 1358b). And three things require attention in regard to speech: the sources of proofs, the style, and the arrangement of the parts of the speech. And in delivering a speech, three qualities must be considered: volume, harmony, and rhythm (*Rhetoric* 1403b).

Then, of ill-temper there are three kinds: irascibility, bitterness, and sullenness. Likewise of unrighteousness: impiety, greed, and outrage (*On Virtues and Vices* 1251a). And it is the same with meanness: love of base gain, parsimony, and niggardliness (*On Virtues and Vices* 1251b).

Et cetera, et cetera. At the beginning of his *On the Heavens*, Aristotle writes: "A magnitude if divisible one way is a line, if two ways a surface, and if three a body. Beyond these there is no other magnitude, because the three dimensions are all that there are, and that which is divisible in three directions is divisible in all. For, as the Pythagoreans say, the world and all that is in it is determined by the number three, since beginning and middle and end give the number of an 'all', and the number they give is the triad. And so, having taken these three from nature as (so to speak) laws of it, we make further use of the number three in the worship of the Gods. Further, we use the terms in practice in this way. Of two things, or men, we say 'both', but not 'all': three is the first number to which the term 'all' has been appropriated. And in this, as we have said, we do but follow the lead which nature gives. Therefore, since 'every' and 'all' and 'complete' do not differ from one another in respect of form, but only, if at all, in their matter and in that to which they are applied, body alone among magnitudes can be complete. For it alone is determined by the three dimensions, that is, is an 'all'."

[11]William Shakespeare, Sonnet 73, *That Time of Year Thou Mayest in Me Behold*:

That time of year thou mayest in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

[12] From William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* 2.7:

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

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Carlos Parada
Lund, Summer 2004

Related sections The Ages of Man (lighter version of this page), Greek-Latin correspondences, The Era of Zeus, Epimetheus (one-act play)

Sources See above.
Abbreviations