

## Hesiod's New Golden Age: An Optimistic Nostalgia

In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod laments his location in cosmic history. The ills of his present situation have led him to feel that he would rather belong in a different era. He wishes that he lived and died in another time (174–46). In addition, Hesiod says (181–201), it may (or will) get much worse and end in total destruction (180): “Zeus will destroy also this race of mortal men” (Ζεὺς δ’ ὀλέσει καὶ τοῦτο γένος μερόπων ἀνθρώπων). The meaning of this line has been much debated. Does it predict an inevitable destruction? Hesiod does not appear to offer any qualification that would suggest he intends otherwise. Yet elsewhere, in a similar passage (268–73), he appears to predict the opposite (273): “But I do not yet expect cunning Zeus will bring it to pass” (ἀλλὰ τὰ γ’ οὐ πῶ ἔολπα τελεῖν Δία μητιόεντα). Some scholars have stressed Hesiod’s pessimism (several cited by Verdenius 1985: 105). And scholars who assume the so-called “Myth of the races” tells a story of inevitable decline are committed to this interpretation, at least tacitly. But recently more scholars have stressed an optimistic streak in the *Works and Days*. Hesiod’s protreptic goal is to warn Perses (and his other readers) of the consequences of continued vice and encourage them on toward virtue. Thus argue Most (1997), Clay (2003: 91–99), Ercolani (2010: 193–94), Scodel (2014: 70–71), and Van Noorden (2015: 84–85).

However, the role of the positive visions of the “Golden race” (109-26), the “race of Heroes” (156-73), and the “Just City” (225-37) have not been sufficiently well integrated into this more optimistic framework. Among all three of these passages we find shared motifs of abundance, flourishing, and reduction in or freedom from troubles. I conclude that the achievable “Just City” stands as a future validated by a nostalgic view of the past.

Hesiod’s present complaints and nostalgic myths have a three-stage structure that ties together the present with the past and the future. Hesiod’s moral and material dislocation, his sense that he and other virtuous people properly belong in a better age, is answered by myths about a past in which the ills of the present were absent. But for Hesiod this is not an idle, fruitless nostalgia for

a past that is forever lost. He recognizes that a world which entirely lacked the ills of his present is impossible: the land will not of its own volition provide a surfeit of food to humans without their labour; mortals could not avoid personal old age. Instead, Hesiod's nostalgia looks forward as well as backward. It allows him and his audience to imagine what a flourishing, virtuous life might look like, while recognizing the limitations of humans in the race of Iron. In the Just city, humans still have to work the land, but there will be no "famine" (λίμος, 230); though its members will grow old and die, the city as a whole will always "flourish" (θάλλουσιν, 236). For Hesiod, present estrangement is answered by a nostalgia that provides the resources to hope for a better future.

### Bibliography

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