

Vergil's Degeneration of Man (G. 1.118-159)

Thanks to the influence of prior scenes of a like ilk, such as Hesiod's ages of man (*Op.* 109-201), the theodicy of the *Georgics* (118-159) has been treated as an aetiology of *labor*. Conflicting with that notion, however, is the peculiar scene at the end of the second *Georgic* where Saturn, even before his expulsion from Olympus, is shown ploughing Italian fields (2.536-538); *labor*, Smolenaars (1987) notes, is part of the Vergilian golden age. This paper argues that, rather than an aetiology of *labor*, the theodicy narrates a degeneration of human work ethic and a subsequent decline in the quality of life. A close reading of the text will demonstrate a shift in human behavior brought about not by the introduction of *labor* but by the way in which people engage it.

Ambiguities early in the degeneration of man cue readers a departure from the Hesiodic model, as the development of agriculture by iron age man is replaced by a progressively more violent approach to the existing skill. The particulars of Vergil's sequence of events, with people mastering sailing and navigation far before more practical skills, for example, demonstrates an inability to cope with adversity as well as an aversion to hard work. Ultimately their domination of the landscape reveals just how hostile to *labor* men can be, but along the way Vergil establishes their capacity to walk back this aggression and restore prosperity.

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