

## Hesiod's Myth of the Ages as an Allegory for the Stages of Life

Hesiod's Myth of the Ages (*Works and Days* 129-234) is one of the more heavily analyzed and excerpted vignettes in the *Works and Days*, and offers to its readers many possible avenues of interpretation. In this paper, I argue that, in addition to other possible readings of the Myth of the Ages, the story also stands as a narrative for the stages of an individual's life, from infancy to middle/old age. While other scholars have gestured in this direction of analysis (see especially Fontenrose 1974, Smith 1980; Falkner 1989), many have struggled with incorporating all five ages. My argument shows how the incorporation of all five ages into the analysis strengthens the allegory, rather than distracting from it.

The Greeks show a fondness for dividing up the ages of an individual's life and presenting types of individuals, often with the addition of extended metaphor, allegory, and similes. Our most famous example of the division of ages may be the riddle of the Sphinx (four legs, two legs, three legs), but it is not the only one. Homer seems to implicitly divide an individual's life into four periods (see Falkner 1990); Solon (Frag. 7 West) divides the life of a man into 10 separate 7 year periods and discusses their predominant characteristics. As for creating typologies of individuals via metaphor, we need only think of Semonides 7 and his types of women. In his use of metals as the vehicle of the allegory, Hesiod reflects or parallels several near eastern traditions. While some are more clearly demarcating historical ages (*Daniel* 2), others are more pliable in their interpretations (cf. the *Bahman Yasht*). In addition, it is commonplace to connect via simile the progression of history with the life of a man (e.g. "a society still in its infancy"); and attitudes towards old age often map onto competing ideas of progress or diminution over time (see Falkner 1989; Zanker 2013). Thus, interpreting Hesiod's Myth of the Ages as, in addition, an allegory for the ages of man provides avenues for

reconciling what may seem to be competing analyses of the function of the Myth of the Ages in the larger context of the *Works and Days*, and in particular the function of Hesiod's description of the Iron Age in the context of this paraenetic poem (see Zanker 2013, Most 1997).

I argue that each stage of the Myth of the Ages represents a stage in the life of an individual. The golden age corresponds with infancy, the silver age with childhood, the bronze age with adolescence, the age of heroes with the first years of adulthood (cf. Solon 7 on the 4<sup>th</sup> hebdomad), and the iron age with middle age. Hesiod's predictions for the end of middle age represent the fear of old age that brings lack of self-sufficiency and eventually death. The interpretation of the age of heroes as corresponding with the first years of adulthood, and thus with Solon's fourth hebdomad and the Homeric concept of the young warrior, like Achilles, in his prime (Falkner 1990) allows readers of Hesiod not to have to explain the five ages, rather than the four we see in most near eastern examples and in Ovid, as an aberration due to poetic necessity. Rather, it shows Hesiod making a distinction between younger and older adulthood, and frames his narrative role as advisor to his brother Perses.

#### Bibliography

- Falkner, T. (1989) "Slouching towards Boeotia: Age and Age-Grading in Hesiodic Myth of the Five Races." *CA* 8.1, 42-60.
- Falkner, T. (1990) "The Politics and Poetics of Time in Solon's 'Ten Ages.'" *CJ* 86.1, 1-15.
- Fontenrose, J. (1974) "Work, Justice, and Hesiod's Five Ages." *CP* 69, 1-16.
- Most, G. (1997) "Hesiod's Myth of the Five (or Three or Four) Races, *PCPhS* 43, 104-127.
- Smith, P. (1980) "History and the Individual in Hesiod's Myth of the Five Races." *CW* 74, 145-163.
- Zanker, A. (2013) "Decline and Parainesis in Hesiod's Race of Iron." *RMfP* 156.1, 1-19.