

The Four Ages (I.89-150)



Virgil Solis, Edition 1581

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The story of man's emergence in a garden of paradise and quick descent into evil is found in the Bible, Hesiod (*Works and Days*), and many other literatures in early societies.. Just as the grass is always greener on the other side, so the good old days are always seen with a rosy glow that makes everyone's childhood a time of innocent joy and cocoon-like safety. Ronald Reagan built his political campaign in 1984 around the idea that it was morning in America and that the country needed to get back to its conservative roots so that everyone could share in the American dream. Ovid divides the fall from the best to the worst into the usual four categories and names them after metals that represent in value and/or use the age under discussion. The first is the Golden Age, characterized by negatives that point out things that will become prominent in future ages (mainly the last one); the positive elements are limited to the last several lines where the people gather food in a perpetual Spring while flowers bloom and rivers of milk and nectar flow and honey drips from trees.

The second is the Silver Age, which occurs after Saturn's overthrow by Jupiter; it is an age that sees the arrival of four seasons, most of them described in unpleasant terms and even Spring is now brief, and men have to move indoors and start to become farmers. The third is the Bronze Age, which receives scant attention and is simply more savage in character and more ready for warfare, but not yet accursed or evil. The final is the Iron Age, which is of the same length as the Golden Age. The good virtues have fled, replaced by vices ranging from deceit to greed. Men have started to sail (a dangerous undertaking in a time of wooden boats and no life preservers), they have started farming on a limited amount of one's own land and they have started mining, another dangerous job, which produces the materials with which one fights (ferrum – iron) and the goal for which one fights (aurum - gold). War emerges as almost a living being with a bloody hand (143). All relationships between people who should love or respect one another are ruined, from hosts and guests through husbands and wives to fathers and sons. With piety dead (148), even justice has fled the earth, completing the rout of virtues mentioned previously in 129-130. Ovid has presented a grim picture of a world at war with itself, a world that needs to be cleansed by a flood after he details the depths to which man sank with the story of Lycaon.

Outline:

89-112 The Golden Age

113-124 The Silver Age

125-127 The Bronze Age

127-150 The Iron Age