

HESIOD. THE AGES OF MAN. From *Works and Days*.

Translated by Thomas Cooke (1703–1756)

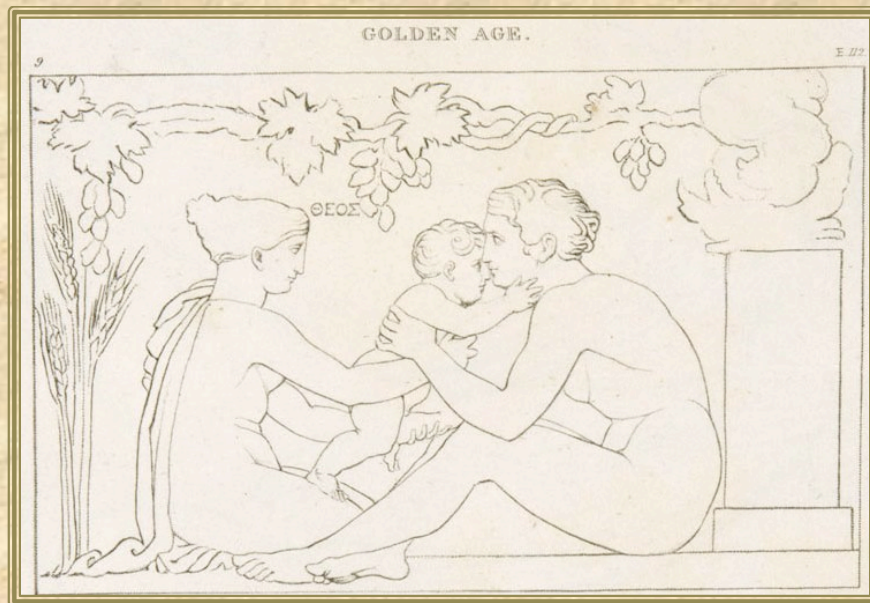
THE ARGUMENT.— Our hypothesis: Hesiod's *Works and Days* is a sublime psychological allegory, not a farmer's almanac; a specimen of inspired ancient wisdom literature that conveys the *perennial philosophy*. The ultimate proof can only come by a reader's interior response to the work, approached as art and poetry. For this it is fitting to consult a version in which the translator is conscious of transmitting an artistic and philosophical message. Of the few poetic translations, none more suggests Muse-inspiration than Thomas Cooke's. The theme of *Works and Days* is the perils of hubris and the rewards of righteousness. The Ages of Man section (WD 109–201) is an allegory for the recurring psychological/moral fall of the human psyche—with similar symbolic meaning as the Fall and Tower of Babel stories of Genesis (Uebersax, 2014; 2016). The moral exhortations (WD 213–340) which follow the Ages of Man myth elaborate on its theme and help to reveal its meaning.

PROEM (WD 1–10)

SING, Muses, sing, from the *Pierian* grove;
 Begin the song, and let the theme be *Jove*;
 From him ye sprung, and him ye first should praise;
 From your immortal sire deduce your lays;
 To him alone, to his great will, we owe, 5
 That we exist, and what we are below.
 Whether we blaze among the sons of fame,
 Or live obscurely, and without a name;
 Or noble, or ignoble, still we prove
 Our lot determined by the will of *Jove*. 10
 With ease he lifts the peasant to a crown,

With the same ease he casts the monarch down;
 With ease he clouds the brightest name in night,
 And calls the meanest to the fairest light;
 At will he varies life through ev'ry state, 15
 Unnerves the strong, and makes the crooked straight.
 Such *Jove*, who thunders terrible from high,
 Who dwells in mansions far above the sky.
 Look down, thou Pow'r supreme, vouchsafe thine aid,
 And let my judgment be by justice sway'd; 20
 O! hear my vows, and thine assistance bring,
 While truths undoubted I to *Perses* sing.

GOLDEN AGE (WD 109–126)

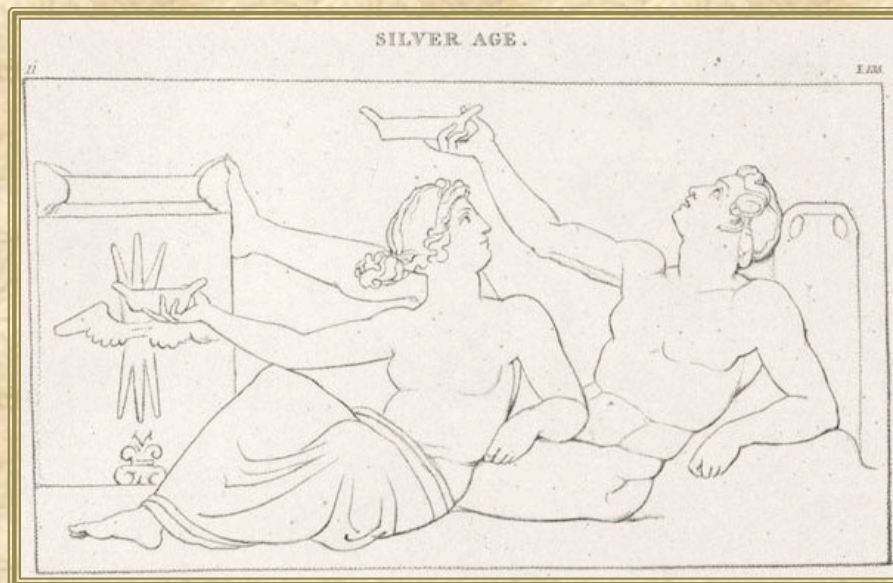


SOON as the deathless gods were born, and man,
 A mortal race, with voice endow'd, began;
 The heav'nly pow'rs from high their work behold,
 And the first age they style an age of gold.
 Men spent a life like gods in *Saturn's* reign, 160
 Nor felt their mind a care, nor body pain;
 From labour free they ev'ry sense enjoy;
 Nor could the ills of time their peace destroy;
 In banquets they delight, removed from care;
 Nor troublesome old age intruded there: 165
 They die, or rather seem to die; they seem
 From hence transported in a pleasing dream.
 The fields, as yet untill'd, their fruits afford,
 And fill a sumptuous and unenvied board:
 Thus, crown'd with happiness their every day, 170
 Serene and joyful pass'd their lives away.



WHEN in the grave this race of men was laid,
 Soon was a world of holy demons made,
 Aerial spirits, by great *Jove* design'd,
 To be on earth the guardians of mankind; 175
 Invisible to mortal eyes they go,
 And mark our actions, good or bad, below;
 Th' immortal spies with watchful care preside,
 And thrice ten thousand round their charges glide:
 They can reward with glory or with gold; 180
 A pow'r they by divine permission hold.

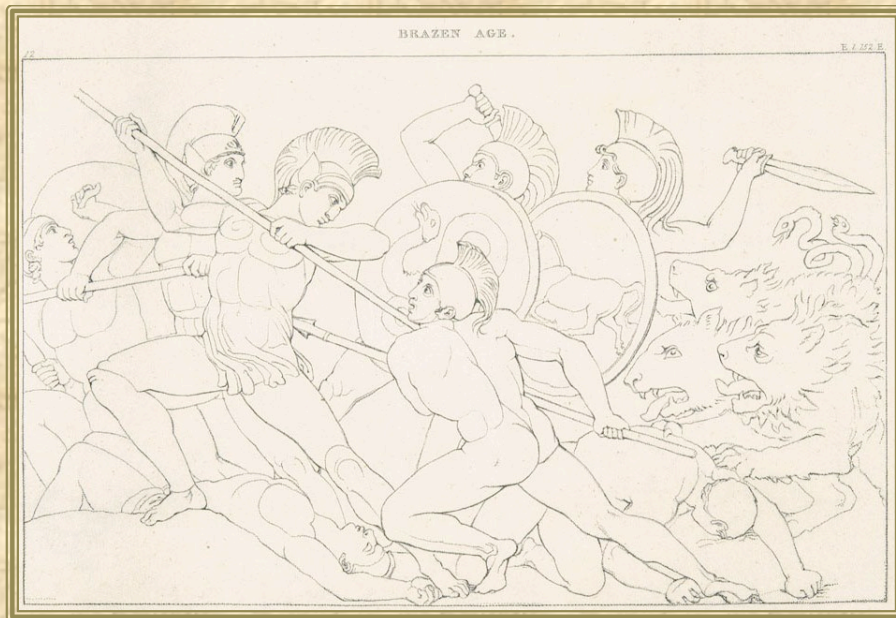
SILVER AGE (WD 127-142)



WORSE than the first, a second age appears,
 Which the celestials call the silver years.
 The golden age's virtues are no more; .

Nature grows weaker than she was before; 185
 In strength of body mortals much decay;
 And human wisdom seems to fade away.
 A hundred years the careful dames employ,
 Before they form'd to man th' unpolish'd boy;
 Who when he reach'd his bloom, his age's prime, 190
 Found, measured by his joys, but short his time.
 Men, prone to ill, *denied the gods their due*,
 And by their follies made their days but few.
 The altars of the bless'd neglected stand,
 Without the off'rings which the laws demand; 195
 But angry Jove in dust this people laid,
 Because no honours to the gods they paid.
 This second race, when closed their life's short span,
 Was happy deemed beyond the state of man;
 Their names were grateful to their children made; 200
 Each paid a rev'rence to his father's shade.

BRONZE AGE (WD 143–155)



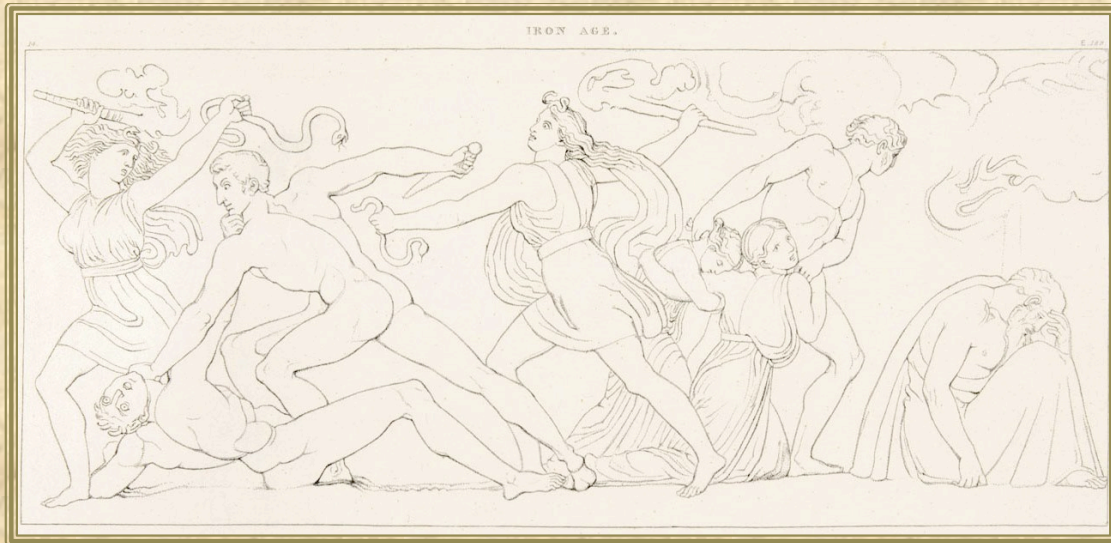
AND now a third, a brazen people rise,
 Unlike the former, men of monstrous size:
 Strong arms extensive from their shoulders grow,
 Their limbs of equal magnitude below; 205
 Potent in arms, and dreadful at the spear,
 They live injurious, and devoid of fear:
 On the crude flesh of beasts they feed alone,
 Savage their nature, and their hearts of stone;
 Their houses brass, of brass the warlike blade, 210
 Iron was yet unknown, in brass they trade:
 Furious, robust, impatient for the fight,

War is their only care, and sole delight;
 To the dark shades of death this race descend,
 By civil discords, an ignoble end! 215
 Strong though they were, death quell'd their boasted might,
 And forced their stubborn souls to leave the light.

AGE OF HEROES (WD 156–173)

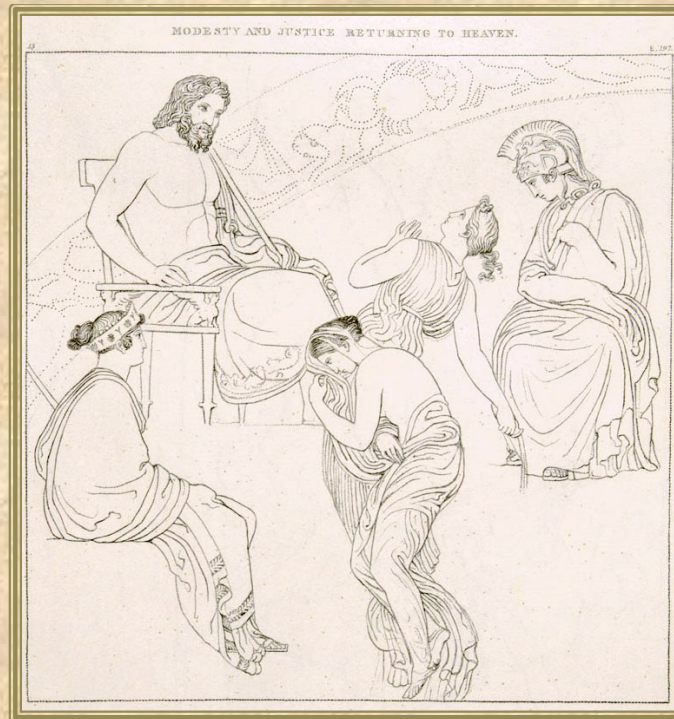
TO THESE a fourth, a better race, succeeds,
 Of godlike heroes, famed for martial deeds;
 Them demigods, at first, their matchless worth 220
 Proclaim aloud all through the boundless earth.
 These, horrid wars, their love of arms, destroy,
 Some at the gates of *Thebes*, and some at *Troy*.
 These for the brothers fell, detested strife!
 For beauty those, the lovely *Grecian* wife! 225
 To these does *Jove* a second life ordain,
 Some happy soil far in the distant main,
 Where live the hero-shades in rich repast,
 Remote from mortals of a vulgar cast:
 There in the islands of the bless'd they find, 230
 Where *Saturn* reigns, an endless calm of mind;
 And there the choicest fruits adorn the fields,
 And thrice the fertile year a harvest yields.

IRON AGE (WD 174–201)



O! would I had my hours of life began
 Before this fifth, this sinful race of man; 235
 Or had I not been call'd to breathe the day,
 Till the rough iron age had pass'd away:
 For now, the times are such, the gods ordain,
 That ev'ry moment shall be wing'd with pain;

Condemn'd to sorrows, and to toil, we live; 240
 Rest to our labour death alone can give;
 And yet, amid the cares our lives annoy,
 The gods will grant some intervals of joy:
 But how degen'rate is the human state!
 Virtue no more distinguishes the great; 245
 No safe reception shall the stranger find;
 Nor shall the ties of blood or friendship bind;
 Nor shall the parent, when his sons are nigh,
 Look with the fondness of a parent's eye;
 Nor to the sire the son obedience pay, 250
 Nor look with rev'rence on the locks of gray,
 But, O! regardless of the pow'rs divine,
 With bitter taunts shall load his life's decline:
 Revenge and rapine shall respect command,
 The pious, just, and good, neglected stand. 255
 The wicked shall the better man distress,
 The righteous suffer, and without redress;
 Strict honesty, and naked truth, shall fail,
 The perjured villain in his arts prevail:
 Hoarse Envy shall, unseen, exert her voice, 260
 Attend the wretched, and in ill rejoice.



At last fair *Modesty* and *Justice* fly,
 Robed their pure limbs in white, and gain the sky;
 From the wide earth they reach the bless'd abodes,
 And join the grand assembly of the gods; 265
 While mortal men, abandon'd to their grief,

Sink in their sorrows, hopeless of relief.

THE HAWK AND THE NIGHTINGALE (WD 202–212)

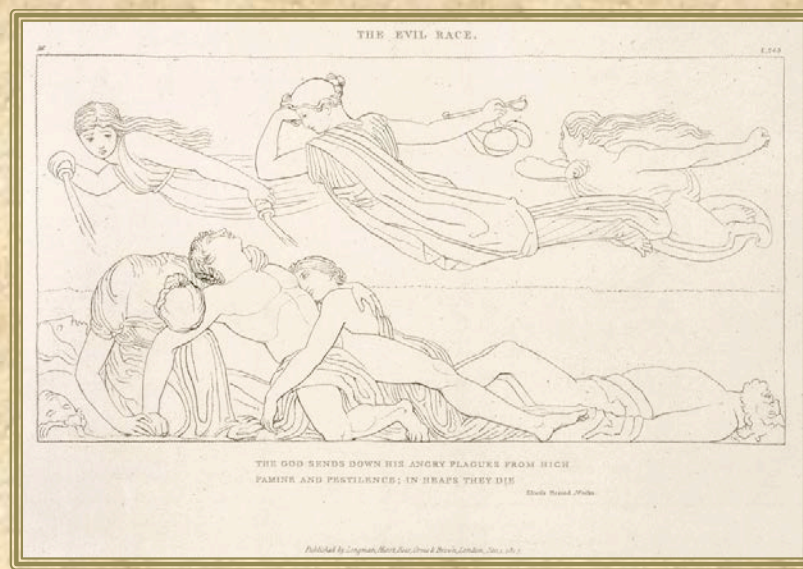
WHILE now my fable from the birds I bring,
To the great rulers of the earth I sing.
High in the clouds a mighty bird of prey 270
Bore a melodious nightingale away;
And to the captive, shiv'ring in despair,
Thus, cruel, spoke the tyrant of the air.
'Why mourns the wretch in my superior pow'r?
Thy voice avails not in the ravish'd hour; 275
Vain are thy cries! at my despotic will,
Or I can set thee free, or I can kill.
Unwisely who provokes his abler foe,
Conquest still flies him, and he strives for woe.'
Thus spoke th' enslaver with insulting pride. 280

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HUBRIS (WD 213–340)

O! *PERSES*, Justice ever be thy guide;
May malice never gain upon thy will,
Malice that makes the wretch more wretched still,
The good man, injured, to revenge is slow, 285
To him the vengeance is the greater woe.
Ever will all injurious courses fail,
And justice ever over wrongs prevail;
Right will take place at last, by fit degrees;
This truth the fool by sad experience sees.
When suits commence, dishonest strife the cause, 290
Faith violated, and the breach of laws,
Ensue; the cries of justice haunt the judge,
Of bribes the glutton, and of sin the drudge.
Thru cities then the holy demon runs,
Unseen, and mourns the manners of their sons; 295
Dispersing evils, to reward the crimes
Of those who banish justice from the times.
Is there a man whom incorrupt we call,
Who sits alike unprejudiced to all;
By him the city flourishes in peace, 300
Her borders lengthen, and her sons increase;
From him far seeing *Jove* will drive afar
All civil discord, and the rage of war.

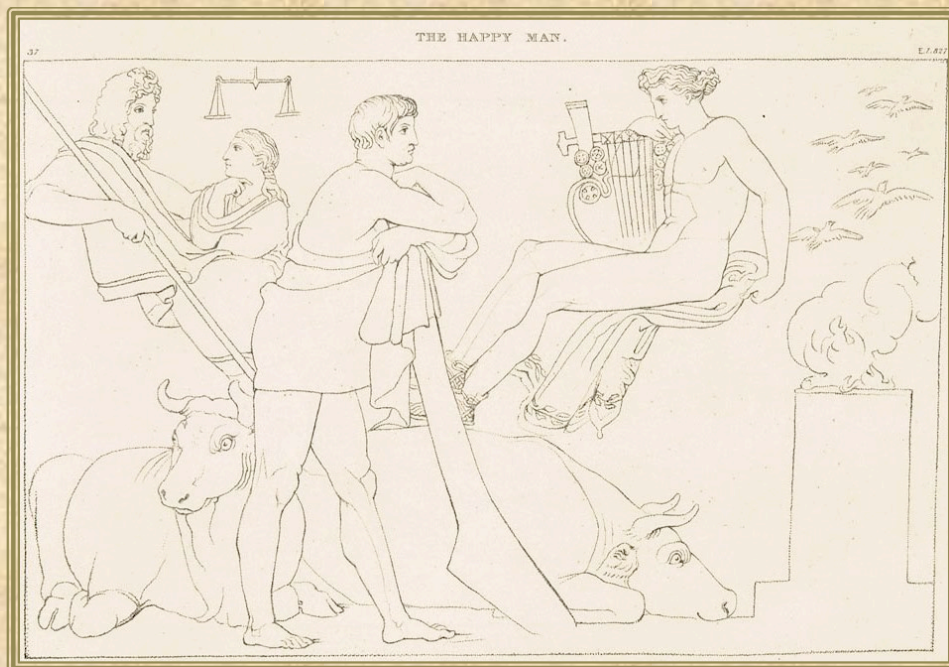


No days of famine to the righteous fall,
 But all is plenty, and delightful all; 305
 Nature indulgent o'er their land is seen,
 With oaks high tow'ring are their mountains green,
 With heavy mast their arms diffusive bow,
 While from their trunks rich streams of honey flow;
 Of flocks untainted are their pastures full, 310
 Which slowly strut beneath their weight of wool;
 And sons are born the likeness of their sire,
 The fruits of virtue, and a chaste desire:
 O'er the wide seas for wealth they need not roam,
 Many and lasting are their joys at home. 315



Not thus the wicked, who in ill delight,

Whose daily acts pervert the rules of right;
 To these the wise disposer, *Jove*, ordains
 Repeated losses, and a world of pains: 320
 Famines and plagues are, unexpected, nigh;
 Their wives are barren, and their kindred die;
 Numbers of these at once are swept away;
 And ships of wealth become the ocean's prey.
 One sinner oft provokes th' avenger's hand;
 And often one man's crimes destroy a land. 325
 Exactly mark, ye rulers of mankind,
 The ways of truth, nor be to justice blind;
 Consider all ye do, and all ye say,
 The holy demons to their god convey;
 Aerial spirits, by great *Jove* designed, 330
 To be on earth the guardians of mankind;
 Invisible to mortal eyes they go,
 And mark our actions, good or bad, below;
 Th' immortal spies with watchful care preside,
 And thrice ten thousand round their charges glide. 335
Justice, unspotted maid, derived from *Jove*,
 Renowned, and revered by the gods above,
 When mortals violate her sacred laws,
 When judges hear the bribe, and not the cause,



Close by her parent god behold her stand, 340
 And urge the punishment their sins demand.
 Look in your breasts, and there survey your crimes,
 Think, O ye judges! and reform betimes;
 Forget the past, nor more false judgments give,

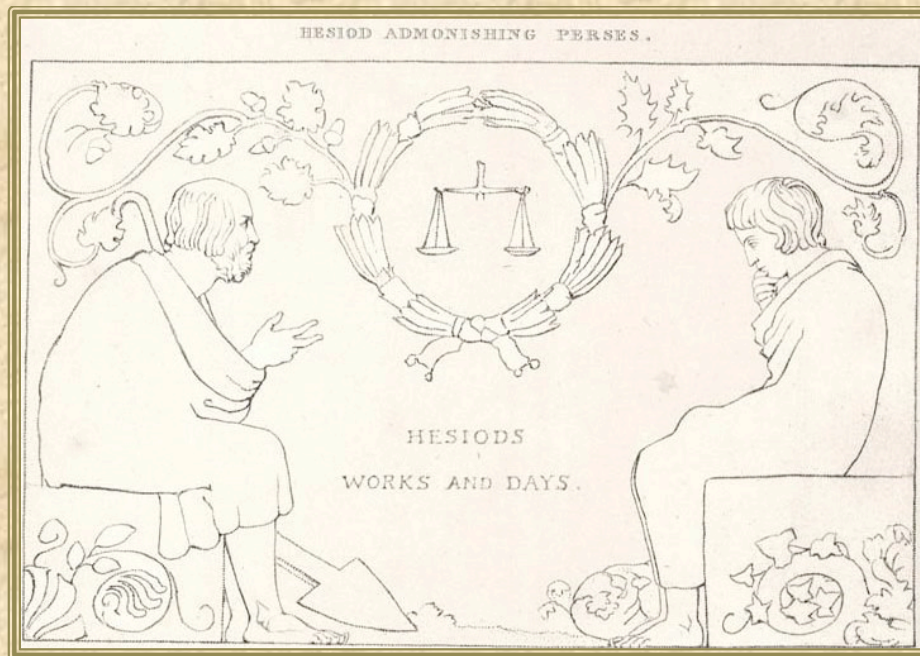
Turn from your ways betimes, O turn and live! 345
Who, full of wiles, his neighbour's harm contrives,
False to himself, against himself he strives;
For he that harbours evil in his mind,
Will from his evil thoughts but evil find;
And lo! the eye of *Jove*, that all things knows, 350
Can, when he will, the heart of man disclose;
Open the guilty bosom all within,
And trace the infant thoughts of future sin.

O! when I hear the upright man complain,
And, by his injuries, the judge arraign, 355
If to be wicked is to find success,
I cry, and to be just to meet distress,
May I nor mine the righteous path pursue,
But interest only ever keep in view
But by reflection better taught, I find 360
We see the present, to the future blind.
Trust to the will of *Jove*, and wait the end,
And good shall always your good acts attend.

These doctrines, *Perses*, treasure in thy heart,
And never from the paths of justice part: 365
Never by brutal violence be swayed;
But be the will of *Jove* in these obeyed.

In these the brute creation men exceed,
They, void of reason, by each other bleed,
While man by justice should be kept in awe, 370
Justice, of nature, well ordained, the law.
Who right espouses through a righteous love,
Shall meet the bounty of the hands of *Jove*;
But he that will not be by laws confined,
Whom not the sacrament of oaths can bind, 375
Who, with a willing soul, can justice leave,
A wound immortal shall that man receive;
His house's honour daily shall decline:
Fair flourish shall the just from line to line.

O! *Perses*, foolish *Perses*, bow thine ear 380
To the good counsels of a soul sincere.
To wickedness the road is quickly found,
Short is the way, and on an easy ground:



The paths of virtue must be reached by toil,
 Arduous, and long, and on a rugged soil, 385
 Thorny the gate, but when the top you gain,
 Fair is the future, and the prospect plain.
 Far does the man all other men excel,
 Who, from his wisdom, thinks in all things well,
 Wisely consid'ring, to himself a friend, 390
 All for the present best, and for the end.
 Nor is the man without his share of praise,
 Who well the dictates of the wise obeys;
 But he that is not wise himself, nor can
 Harken to wisdom, is a useless man. 395

Ever observe, *Perses*, of birth divine,
 My precepts and the profit shall be thine;
 Then famine always shall avoid thy door,
 And *Ceres*, fair-wreathed goddess, bless thy store.
 The slothful wretch, who lives from labour free, 400
 Like drones, the robbers of the painful bee,
 Has always men, and gods, alike his foes;
 Him famine follows with her train of woes.
 With cheerful zeal your mod'rate toils pursue,
 That your full barns you may in season view. 405
 The man industrious stranger is to need,
 A thousand flocks his fertile pastures feed;
 As with the drone, with him it would not prove;
 Him men and gods behold with eyes of love.
 To care and labour think it no disgrace, 410
 False pride! the portion of the sluggard race:
 The slothful man, who never work'd before,

Shall gaze with envy on thy growing store,
Like thee to flourish, he will spare no pains; 415
For lo! the rich, virtue and glory gains.

Strictly observe the wholesome rules I give,
And, bless'd in all, thou like a god shalt live.
Ne'er to thy neighbour's goods extend thy cares,
Nor be neglectful of thine own affairs.
Let no degen'rate shame debase thy mind, 420
Shame that is never to the needy kind;
The man that has it will continue poor;
He must be bold that would enlarge his store.
But ravish not, depending on thy might,
Injurious to thyself, another's right. 425
Who, or by open force, or secret stealth,
Or perjured wiles, amasses heaps of wealth,
Such many are, whom thirst of gain betrays,
The gods, all seeing, shall o'ercloud his days;
His wife, his children, and his friends, shall die, 430
And, like a dream, his ill-got riches fly:
Nor less, or to insult the suppliant's cries,
The guilt, or break through hospitable ties.
Is there who, by incestuous passion led,
Pollutes with joys unclean his brother's bed, 435
Or who, regardless of his tender trust,
To the poor helpless orphan proves unjust;
Or, when the father's fatal day appears,
His body bending through the weight of years,
A son who views him with unduteous eyes, 440
And words of comfort to his age denies,
Great *Jove* vindictive sees the impious train,
And, equal to their crimes, inflicts a pain.

These precepts be thy guide through life to steer:
Next learn the gods immortal to revere: 445
With unpolluted hands, and heart sincere,
Let from your herd, or flock, an off'ring rise;
Of the pure victim burn the white fat thighs;
And to your wealth confine the sacrifice.
Let the rich fumes of od'rous incense fly, 450
A grateful savour, to the pow'rs on high;
The due libation nor neglect to pay,
When ev'ning closes, or when dawns the day:
Then shall thy work, the gods thy friends, succeed.



Credits. Line art from Flaxman/Blake (1817)

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