

- *METAMORPHOSES* -

By Ovid

(c. 8 A.D.) (translation by Ian Johnston)

[After the creation of the natural world...]

What was still missing was an animal
more spiritual than these, more capable
of higher thinking, which would be able
to dominate the others. Man was born— 110

either that creator of things, the source
of a better world, made him from divine seed,
or the Earth, newly formed and divided
only recently from lofty aether
still held seeds related to the heavens,
which Prometheus, Iapetus' son, mixed PROMETHEUS
with river water and made an image

of the gods who rule all things.¹ Other creatures
keep their heads bent and gaze upon the ground,
but he gave man a face which could look up 120

and ordered him to gaze into the sky
and, standing tall, raise his countenance
towards the stars. Thus, what had been crude earth
and formless, was transformed and then took on
the shapes of human life, unknown till then.

First the Golden Age was born. It fostered THE GOLDEN AGE

faith and right all on its own, without laws
and without revenge. Fear and punishment
did not exist. There were no threatening words
etched in brass and set up for men to read, 130
nor were a crowd of suppliants afraid

¹Iapetus and his son Prometheus were Titans, members of the family of ruling gods before Jupiter overthrew his father, Saturn, and imprisoned him. Jupiter and the major gods around him are called Olympians, because they are associated with Mount Olympus in northern Greece.

of the looks of men who judged them.² They lived
in safety, with no one there to punish.

No chopped-down pine tree had yet descended
down its mountain slope into the flowing waves,
so it might travel to a foreign world,
and mortals were familiar with no shores
except their own.³ There were no deep ditches
enclosing towns, no straight trumpets of war
or horns of curving brass, no swords or helmets.

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People passed the time in gentle leisure
and security, with no need for troops.

The earth itself, also free and untouched
by hoes, not yet carved up by any ploughs,
produced all things spontaneously, and men,
content with food which grew without duress,
gathered arbutus fruits, mountain berries,
cornels, berries clinging to harsh brambles,
and fallen acorns from the spreading tree
of Jupiter.⁴ It was always springtime,

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and gentle breezes of warm air caressed
flowers which did not grow from any seeds.
Soon unploughed earth brought forth her crops, as well,
and the land, without being refreshed, grew white
with heavy ears of grain. Rivers of milk
would sometimes flow. Sometimes streams of nectar
and yellow honey dripped from green oak trees.

Once Saturn was cast in gloomy Tartarus,
Jupiter ruled the world. A Silver Age
then followed, less favourable than gold,

THE SILVER AGE

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²The Romans inscribed their laws on brass and placed the tablets in a public place for people to see.

³The reference here is to chopping trees down on mountain slopes in order to construct ships from timber.

⁴The tree of Jupiter is the oak.

but still more valuable than yellow bronze.⁵
Jupiter shortened the previous springtime
and split each year into different seasons,
with winter, summer, changeable autumn,
and short-lived spring. Then, for the first time,
air glowed white, scorched with blazing arid heat,
and ice hung down, congealed by wind. Then men
first moved to houses. Their homes were caverns,
dense thickets, and brushwood bound with bark.
Then they began to bury Ceres' seeds
in lengthy furrows, and young bullocks groaned,
straining at the yoke.⁶

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After these two ages,
a bronze race followed, with fiercer natures,
more inclined to wage horrific war,
but not to act without due piety.
Finally came the brutal Age of Iron.
During this era of debased desires,
every form of crime broke out, and honour,
truth, and faith ran off. In their place appeared
cheating, treachery, deceit, viciousness,
and criminal cravings for possessions.
Men set sails to catch the winds, though sailors
at this point did not understand them well,
and ships' keels, which for a long time had stood
high in the hills, scudded through unknown seas.
Careful surveyors marked long boundaries
on lands as common to men earlier
as air and sunlight. And the fertile soil

THE BRONZE AND IRON AGES

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⁵The first family of gods, led by Saturn, was overthrown by Jupiter, and most of them were confined deep underground. Tartarus was the lowest point of the underworld.

⁶Ceres was the goddess responsible for food and grain crops.

no longer was required to provide
just crops and food it was obliged to give, 190
for men went to the bowels of the earth
and dug for ores, which spurred them on to vice.
These the earth had hidden and moved away
to Stygian shades.⁷ Now harmful iron emerged
and gold, which brings more injuries than iron.
Then war, which fights with both, comes on the scene,
brandishing and rattling weapons in hands
all stained with blood. Plunder becomes a way of life.
Guests are not safe from those who welcome them,
nor is the father from his son-in-law. 200
Love of brothers is also rare. Men hope
their wives will die, and wives all feel the same
about their husbands. Dreadful stepmothers
mix lethal poisons, and sons keep asking
about their father's age before his time.
Piety lies conquered, and virgin Astraea,
the last celestial being, abandoned Earth
now soaked in blood.⁸

⁷The Stygian shades were associated with the river Styx, one of the main rivers of the Underworld. Thus, iron and gold are deep in the earth, close to Hades.

⁸Astraea, daughter of Jupiter, was goddess of justice.