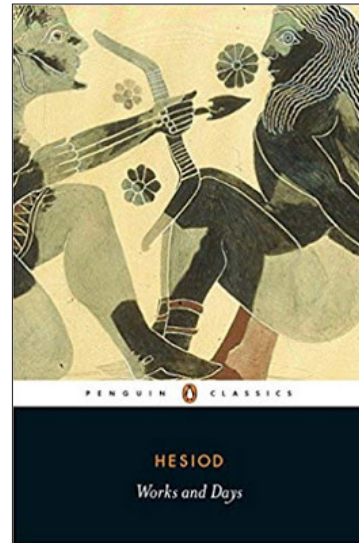


Hesiod Works and Days
Translated by A.E. Stallings
Penguin Classics, Great Britain
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52 Pages, \$9.00

Review by Dennis Daly

Just the polish from A.E. Stallings' new translation of Hesiod's *Works and Days* can blind. Only momentarily, of course. But certainly the well-wrought formality of each couplet causes the reader a certain hesitancy and a loss of verbal sense as he or she marvels at the architectural details and pinpoint verbiage embedded by Stallings in this brilliant rendition of a fountainhead epic.



Hesiod's persona, through Stallings, reaches out from its ensconced eighth century (BCE) sanctuary with unmistakable antique connections cocooned within a surprisingly modern ethos. Born in the boondocks of Grecian Boeotia, Hesiod was a child of emigres. His father had fled the hardships of a sailor's life and re-established his family inland, in the farming village of Askra, under the loom of Mount Helikon. This farming background frames and informs the structure of *Works and Days*. Starvation, according to Hesiod, is only one failed harvest away and worldly riches needs only a god's nod and hard work. In fact Zeus has sent a twin of Strife to prod men on. She impels human kind with envy and competitive juices. Hesiod explains the power of this second sisterly Strife this way,

*...This Strife, high-seated Zeus
Set in earth's roots—for this one has a use:
She spurs a man who otherwise would shirk,
Shiftless and lazy, to put his hands to work
Seeing a rich man plough and plant and labor
To set up house—then neighbor envies neighbor
Racing to reach prosperity. This Strife
Is boon to man. And that's why in this life
Potter hates potter, builder has no regard
For builder, nor beggar, beggar; bard loathes bard.*

"Bard loathes bard." Hmmmm. This may shock. Except, of course in Boston Massachusetts and its surrounding environs, circa 2019, where groups of poets and other elites muster ostensibly like militia into armed camps. I suspect other geographical poetry hot spots offer the same dynamic. Nor are these contributory ills the only ones inculcated into human nature. *Works and Days* significantly contains the first account of Pandora's Box (or in this case jar) of mischief and needling woes. Actually Pandora herself, the gods modeled from clay making her also a receptacle of many vices and a few virtues. Yet another gift from the gods.

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Considered the archetype of a long line of self-styled poets, still prevalent in today's 21st century prosodic circles, Hesiod neatly provides his name (from the Theogony) and his Bio (from Works and Days). He speaks of himself in a way that his contemporary, Homer, could not. Hesiod even advertises himself as a prize-winning poet and poet laureate. He won a three legged caldron (a not insignificant prize) at a funeral games competition on the island of Euboea, apparently his only sea-going trip. He had earlier received his laurels, a laurel staff—not wreath, awarded by the Muses themselves, on the slopes of Mount Helicon. How, one wonders, did the Muses introduce themselves to this young sheep herder? Hesiod had pretty obviously needed to establish his bardic authority and, with these props, he did so—dramatically.

Hesiod had a younger brother named Perses, who seems to have jilted him out of part of his inheritance. Much of Works and Days is addressed to Perses and the magistrates involved in the case. The poetic work itself is a didactic disquisition on the evils in society and the importance of an all-encompassing cosmic justice system that promises (or should promise) fairness to hardworking and decent folk. Although the poet seems to lament his own trials and tribulations, especially his brother's actions, Hesiod mainly focuses on the resolution of worldly conflict, both within his family and without. His suggestions of future probity to his wayward brother appear well meant and sincere. Hesiod addresses his brother reasonably,

*So Perses, mull these matters in your mind,
Give ear to Justice; leave Force far behind.
For Kronos' son gave justice to mankind;
The fish and beasts and winged birds of the air
Eat one another—they don't have a share
Of law and right—he made the law for man,
And this way is by far the better plan.
Far-seeing Zeus will grant prosperity
To him who speaks up for the truth...*

In the same way that Alexander Pope made Homer's Iliad his own masterpiece, Stallings has made Hesiod's Works and Days her own signature piece. She retrieves Hesiod from the ancient mists of Western Civilization, as the oral traditions were dying and as the written word slowly gained credence and immortalizing legitimacy. She translates Hesiod's original unrhymed dactylic hexameters, a mix of Ionic Greek and Aeolic, into rhymed English iambic pentameter. The rhyme she adds as an extra hurdle because, as she explains it, "I can't fudge through something puzzling if it must also rhyme and scan. Also, rhymed iambic pentameter couplets can have, in the twenty-first century, a slightly old-fashioned feel to them... as Hesiod's Greek would have had a quaint ring even to classical authors." Consider these timeless lines of Hesiod via Stallings that summarize the gift of especial days with mnemonic persuasion and elegant delivery,

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*These days are gifts to those who dwell on earth—
The rest, haphazard, with no special worth,
Fateless. One praises one day, one, another;
Few know: a day can go from stepmother
To mother. Blessed and rich is he, who's wise
In all these things, who works, and in the eyes
Of the deathless ones is blameless, one who reads
The omens of birds, avoiding all misdeeds.*

For clarity and class and prosody that sings through its print, Stalling's Hesiod is unrivaled. Endear yourselves to the immortals and read this compelling translation that introduces with a formalist literary flourish that fragile Western Civilization which still, to this day, nurtures the best of artistic creation.