

## Hesiod, *Works and Days*

The following excerpts were translated by the poet A.E. Stallings. This first excerpt is published in *The Hopkins Review*, Vol. 8.3, Summer 2015, pp. 372-378. Here is her introduction to the text:

The Greek poet Hesiod composed his didactic poem *Works and Days* sometime in the latter half of the eighth century B.C. He is the first Western poet to tell us directly about his life: we learn that he is in a lawsuit with his brother Perses over their father's patrimony (and that Perses may be bribing the judges), that their father was unsuccessful in merchant shipping and emigrated from the Greek colony of Cymae in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) to mainland Greece, settling in back-of-beyond Boeotia in the village of Askra ("miserable in winter, wretched in summer, never pleasant") in the shadow of Mount Helicon. Hesiod may know farming, but he is also proud of his poetry—his one sea voyage was to the island of Eubeia for a poetry contest (the poem he recited there may even have been his *Theogony*), whence he brought home the prize of a bronze tripod, dedicating it to the Muses.

In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod gives his brother Perses (whom he constantly addresses as a fool or idiot) advice on farming and sailing, lectures him on justice and how to keep out of debt, and throws in an almanac of propitious and ill-omened days for assorted activities. The poem is composed, as are Homer's poems, in unrhymed dactylic hexameter, in a literary dialect (not the language of Boeotian farmers). While often hewing to practical matters (when to sow or reap, how to build a plow, reckoning the seasons by the constellations), the poem has its moments of narrative (Pandora), allegory (indeed, it contains the first animal allegory in Western literature), and lyrical natural description.

Hesiod's is the first telling we have of the story of Pandora and the Jar. (The idea that it is a box first appears in Erasmus; he seems to have conflated it with the Cupid and Psyche story.) Note too that here there is no injunction against opening the jar.

The description of winter is justly famous for its visceral description of the cold weather out of doors for animals and men (the month of Lenaion corresponds roughly to our late January and early February), contrasted to a tender domestic scene of indoor luxury: a maiden taking a bath and a cozy nap on a winter's day. Sans-a-Bone is usually thought to be the octopus. Some commenters find it odd that the octopus is included in this list of land-animals confronting the flensing wind, but of course it appears in its cold water haunts right after the virgin in her warm bath.

In Greek, timeliness and beauty both come from the word for "hour." The Hours are, in turn, beautiful goddesses, governing the seasons. They appear in the Pandora section, adorning this "well-endowed" creation with the flowers of spring to emphasize her nubile youth. Yet Hesiod's is a harsh world, where timeliness is all. Plant or harvest too late and you will starve.

The charge of misogyny is sometimes laid at Hesiod's door, and he is of course a reflection of his culture and age. But in the *Works and Days* he seems more of a misanthrope. Pandora is trouble, but Epimetheus (another no-count brother, we notice) is to blame. A bad wife will age a man, but there is nothing better than a good one. We get a glimpse of life in a small village, where everyone will know if you've made a bad match and mock you. I am briefly, if incongruously, put in mind of Jane Austen: "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn." Even the blacksmith's forge seems to me oddly familiar (I have lived in Greece since 1999), an exclusively male hangout for the retired, the

under- and unemployed, to sit and warm themselves by the hearth of gossip, banter, and political debate. In modern Greece it is called the Kafeneion. The only difference is in Hesiod's time, there was no coffee.

## 1. The Story of Pandora

*lines 42–104*

For the gods have hidden livelihood away  
From men, else you could work a single day  
And easily have enough for living clear  
Without a lick of work for the whole year,  
And soon season the rudder over the smoke,  
Retire the drudging mules, the oxen's yoke.

Zeus hid it—he was galled at heart because  
He'd been duped by that crook, Prometheus,  
So he invented dismal woes for men  
And hid fire—which Prometheus again  
Filched in a hollow fennel stalk—a plunder  
From under the nose of Zeus who joys in thunder.

But Zeus, cloud-herder, angrily addressed him,  
“Prometheus, there's no one but you best him  
In brains; you're thrilled you stole fire, tricked my mind:  
So much the worse for you and all mankind  
To come: I'll pay them back evil for fire,  
Evil wherein they find their heart's desire;  
They'll greet their bane with open arms!” Then after  
The sire of men and gods thundered with laughter,  
He ordered famed Hephaestus without delay  
To moisten earth with water, and give the clay  
A human's speech and strength, the lovely face  
Of a deathless goddess, a virgin's form and grace;  
He bade Athena make her a skilled hand  
At weaving intricate cloth, and his command  
To golden Aphrodite was to shed  
Beauty and troublous passion on her head,  
And limb-wasting worries. Then Argus-killer  
Hermes the Go-Between, Zeus told to fill her  
With a bitch's mind and the cunning of a thief.

He spoke, and all the gods obeyed their chief.  
To Zeus's plan, the Cripple right away  
Modeled a modest maiden out of clay;  
Clear-eyed Athena dressed her, cinched her waist;

Lady Persuasion and the Graces placed  
 Gold jewels upon her, and the fair-tressed  
 Hours Wreathed her all about with springtime flowers,  
 And Athena fitted adornment to each part.

Then Hermes Argus-killer set in her heart  
 Lies and wheedling words, a knack for deceit.  
 The design of Zeus deep-thunderer complete,  
 Hermes, the gods' herald and proclaimer  
 Gave her a voice. "Pandora," he would name her,  
 The "All-Endowed," since all with an abode  
 On Mount Olympus had some gift bestowed  
 Upon her—grief for all bread-winning men.

When Hermes had done this feat of treachery, then  
 Father Zeus sent him, Argus-slayer, swift  
 Messenger of the Gods, with her as gift  
 For Epimetheus ("Hindsight"). Prometheus ("Forethought")  
 Had warned his brother, yet Hindsight forgot,  
 To send back, not accept, a gift from Zeus  
 Lest evil come to men. It was no use:  
 The deed was done before he understood  
 That what he had accepted was no good.

For once the tribes of men lived on the soil  
 Untouched by woe, apart from parlous toil,  
 And free from Man's destruction: dread disease.  
 [Affliction ages men quick as you please.]  
 But woman grappled off the massive lid  
 From the jar, scattering its contents as she did,  
 Unleashing sorry troubles on Mankind.  
 Just Hope did not fly out. She stayed behind  
 In her impregnable home beneath the lip  
 Of the jar; before she had a chance to slip  
 Out, woman closed the lid, by Zeus's plan.  
 Those myriad ills go prowling among Man:  
 The sea is full of bane, the earth of blight,  
 Some ailments come by day, and some by night,  
 Bringing ills to man, they come of their own choice,  
 In silence, since Zeus robbed them of their voice.

## 2. Winter

*lines 493–535*

In winter, pass the blacksmith's forge, don't stop

Where men gather and chat in his warm shop.  
 When cold keeps men from toiling in the fields,  
 One who is diligent may boost his yields,  
 So don't get caught in winter's bitter freeze  
 By Shiftlessness with Poverty, and squeeze  
 Your swollen foot with a bony hand. The dope  
 Who's idle and awaits an empty hope,  
 Gripes in his soul, lacking a livelihood.  
 But as provider, Hope is not much good,  
 Not to a man who lacks his daily bread  
 But loiters at the forge all day instead.  
 Instruct your slaves while summer's in its prime:  
 "Summer won't last. Build shelter while there's time."

Lenaion—the entire month—is rife  
 With evils, each day like a skinning knife.  
 Avoid it, and the killing frosts brought forth  
 On the earth when the wind blows from the North  
 Through Thrace, mother of horses, and sets seething  
 The wide sea. Wold and wood howl with its breathing.  
 Falling on crowds of lofty oaks and dense  
 Groves of fir, in the mountain dales, it bends  
 Them down to the rich earth; the whole wood wails.  
 The creatures shiver, and they tuck their tails  
 Under their genitals; no matter how thick  
 Their fur, the wind's cold cuts right to the quick.  
 It pierces ox-hide, useless as a coat,  
 And blows right through the long hair of a goat.  
 But the force of the North Wind does not go through sheep—  
 Their wooly fleeces grow too thick and deep.  
 It sends an old man running like a wheel;  
 Indoors, the soft-skinned virgin does not feel  
 The cold, snug by her mother, ignorant of,  
 At least as yet, the deeds of golden Love.  
 And takes a bath, and oils her tender skin  
 Richly with ointments, and lies down within,  
 On a winter's day, when Sans-a-Bone, in gloom,  
 Gnaws at his foot down in his fireless room,  
 Since the sun leads him to no new pasture then,  
 But roams among the cities of black men,  
 And among the Greeks, is slower to peep out.  
 Then woodland-dwellers, with horns and without,  
 Miserably, with teeth a-chatter, rush,  
 Crashing pell-mell through the underbrush,  
 Shelter is the only thing they crave:  
 They seek a sturdy lair, protected cave.

That's when they shuffle down the woodland track  
 Like a three-legged man with a broken back,  
 His head bowed, gaze fixed on the ground below,  
 Just so they rove, shunning the blank of snow.

### 3. Ripeness Is All

*lines 694–724*

Keep measure in your mind.  
 Ripeness is prime In every undertaking.  
 In due time, Take a wife under your roof—for you  
 That's thirty, give or take a year or two,  
 She should be four years into womanhood,  
 Wed in the fifth, a virgin. Teach her good  
 And useful ways. Above all, choose a bride  
 From nearby, having searched on every side,  
 Lest your marriage make your neighbors' mirth.  
 There's nothing a man gets of greater worth  
 Than a good wife, but nothing's colder than  
 A supper-saboteur, who'll sear her man,  
 Though he be tough, without a frying pan,  
 One who will serve his old age to him raw.

Keep retribution of the Blessed in awe.  
 Don't raise friend to the footing of a brother,  
 Nor if you do, be first to wrong the other.  
 Don't slander for talk's sake, but if some trouble  
 Starts with him, word or deed, then pay back double,  
 Mind you. But if again he would be friends,  
 And if he plans to offer you amends,  
 Accept. The man who changes friends is base.  
 Don't let mind be the perjurer of face.

Don't get a name for many guests, or none,  
 Don't keep low company, nor be the one  
 To wrangle with high. Don't ever dare to blame  
 A man for soul-destroying Need—it came  
 From the everlasting gods. The greatest treasure  
 Among men is a chary tongue, the pleasure,  
 A tongue that moves in measure. If you say  
 Evil, then soon worse words will come your way.  
 Don't be foul-weathered at the crowded feast;  
 The pleasure's most when shared; the cost is least.

This second excerpt is published in *The New Criterion*, Vol. 33.8, 2015, pp. 1-5.

#### 4. Ode to Work (287-411)

Bad's had for the taking, woes galore,  
 The road is smooth and short-She lives next door.  
 The strait and narrow path the gods have set  
 To Virtue is steep and long and paved with sweat.  
 It's hard going at first, but by the time  
 You reach the peak, it seems an easy climb  
 Uphill as it is.

That man is best  
 Who thinks for himself, and puts all to the test,  
 Weighing the ends and outcomes. It will suffice  
 Even to heed another's good advice.  
 But he who can't think for himself, nor once  
 Learn from another is a useless dunce.

Perses! Heroes' blood runs through your veins!  
 Take what I've said to heart. Start taking pains-  
 Work keeps the wolf of famine from the door;  
 Revered Demeter smiles and fills your store.  
 But famine dogs the heels of those who shirk,  
 And gods and men shun him who will not work.  
 He's like blunt-bottomed drones who take their ease  
 While gobbling up the labor of the bees.  
 Look to your work, order your chores with reason,  
 So that barns groan with harvest in due season.  
 It's work that prospers men, and makes them rich  
 In heads of livestock, and it's working which  
 Endears you to the immortals. There's no shame  
 In working, but in shirking, much to blame.  
 And if you work, the man who twiddles his thumbs  
 Is quick to envy you grown rich. Wealth comes  
 With fame and honor in her retinue.  
 With work, you better what's allotted you.  
 Don't covet the possessions of your neighbor:  
 Turn your foolish heart. Look to your labor,  
 Secure your living; as I bid you, heed.  
 Shame's no provider for the man in need,  
 Shame who can harm a man or make him grand:  
 For Shame and poverty go hand in hand;  
 Bold goes with riches. Property should not  
 Be up for grabs. God-given's better got.  
 For if somebody seizes some great prize  
 By force of arms, or burgles with his lies,

As often happens when greed tricks the mind  
 And brazen Shamelessness leaves Shame behind,  
 With ease, the gods obscure him: all he reaps  
 Is a dwindled house; wealth isn't his for keeps.  
 The same for him who wrongs a guest or harms  
 A suppliant, or takes into his arms  
 His brother's wife behind his brother's back,  
 Indecent deed! or him who in his lack  
 Of scruples swindles orphans, or in rage  
 At his father on the cruel sill of age  
 Hurls bruising words at him. This man incurs  
 The wrath of Zeus, and gets what he deserves.

But turn your witless mind from all such vice.  
 According to your means, make sacrifice  
 With a clean, right spirit, to the gods, and burn  
 Bright thigh-bones on the altar, and in turn  
 Give votives and libations, both at night  
 And at the first return of holy light,  
 So heaven smiles on you and your affairs,  
 And none bids for your land, but you for theirs.

Invite a friend but not a foe to feast-  
 Invite the man close by not last nor least;  
 If something bad should happen on your farm,  
 Neighbors arrive half-dressed at the alarm;  
 Kinsmen, belted. A bad neighbor's a curse,  
 As a good one is a dream-quite the reverse.  
 Who has a trusty neighbor, you'll allow,  
 Has a share in something precious. Nary a cow  
 Would be lost, but for bad neighbors. Keep good track  
 When you measure from your neighbor, pay him back  
 Good measure too; better, if in your power;  
 You'll find him steadfast in a needful hour.

Don't profit wickedly. Ill-gotten gains  
 Amount to nothing more than woes and banes.  
 Befriend a friend, meet compromise half-way.  
 Give to a giver, but to a tight-fist, nay.  
 Give begets gift; grasp, grudge. For Give is breath  
 While Seize is Evil, and her wages, death.  
 Who gives with open hands, though great the gift,  
 Rejoices in it and his spirits lift.  
 But he who steals, trusting in brazen vice,  
 Though small the theft, congeals his heart to ice.

Deposit even small amounts, but do  
 It often, and you'll find that they accrue.  
 He wards off sun-burnt famine who can add  
 To what he has. To store at home's not bad;  
 Outside is risky. To take from what you've got  
 Is fine, to be in need of what you've not  
 Is woe to the spirit. Mind you, that's how things are.

Drink deeply from new-broached or near-drained jar.  
 Thrift's for half-way; thrift's stingy at the end.  
 Ensure the settled payment for a friend;  
 Smile on a brother, but have a witness, when  
 Trust and mistrust alike have ruined men.

## 5.

Don't let a woman mystify your mind  
 With sweet talk and the sway of her behind-  
 She's just after your barn. He who believes  
 A woman is a man who trusts in thieves.  
 May an only son shore up his father's walls,  
 For that's how wealth amasses in the halls.  
 May he die full of years and leave one son  
 Behind in turn. (Though it were easily done  
 For Zeus to bestow untold wealth on more-  
 More hands, more chores done, and a fuller store.)  
 But if it's wealth you long for in your chest,  
 Then do this: work on work and never rest.

When Atlas' daughters rise, the Pleiades,  
 Start harvesting, plough at their setting. These  
 Are hidden forty days and forty nights,  
 But as the year goes round, once more their lights  
 Appear, when it's time to hone the iron tool.  
 On the plains and for men near the sea, one rule  
 Applies, also for everyone who dwells  
 Far from the shore, among the glens and dells,  
 Rich country: naked sow, and naked plough,  
 And reap your harvest naked. This is how  
 You'll gather all Demeter's works in season  
 Ripe in due time, so there will be no reason  
 For you to beg in vain from door to door  
 As you've come to me now. I'll give no more,  
 No extra. Foolish Perses-work! again,  
 Work at the work gods have marked out for men,  
 Lest sick at heart, with wife and kids, you find



You beg from neighbors and they pay no mind.  
It might work twice or thrice; you'll waste your breath  
However, if you pester them to death,  
Your words broadcast in vain. I'd urge you heed:  
Think how to clear debts and not starve. You'll need  
A woman and an ox to start a life:  
A ploughing ox; bondswoman, not a wife,  
One who can follow oxen, and prepare  
The household's needs and management with care,  
Lest you go begging and be turned away,  
And fruits of your labor dwindle day by day.  
Don't put off till tomorrow or till later-  
No barn is filled by a procrastinator.