

All that Glitters is not Gold

by R.A. Faber

The motif of the golden age when people lived in peaceful bliss permeates Latin poetry. The archetype of this motif is the famous tale of the "ages of man" recounted in Hesiod's *Works and Days*: the gods who inhabit Olympus first created the golden race of mortals. Living carefree lives, these mortals were as incorruptible as the precious metal itself. They knew no sorrow or toil, and old age did not affect them. The earth produced grain freely and in abundance, so that the people benefitted from all good things. This was not a race made of gold, notes Plato (*Cratylus* 398a), rather it was an upright and noble race. Yet when this generation passed from the earth, writes Hesiod, it was replaced with a different, silver race. Hardship, folly and impiety attended these people. Bronze symbolizes the third age, when violence and war increase. A race of stalwart heroes appears briefly, but soon a terrible age of iron takes over. Hesiod wishes that he had not been born during the time of this generation, for he predicts that further decline will accompany these people and illness will afflict them. Hesiod's is a pessimistic tale of the degeneration of humanity.

The notion that a better race of mortals existed in the past appealed to so many Latin poets that it was treated as commonplace already at the time of Lucretius. In his well-known "On the Nature of Things," Lucretius employs the golden age motif to make a satirical comment about humanity.

According to him (5.925 ff.) the age of bliss and happiness was when people lived in rustic simplicity and worked hard upon the land. Unlike the Greeks, many Romans believed that toil and hardship produce noble and honest folk; accordingly, Lucretius' first race was a hardy and tough one. Indeed, it was when gold was discovered that the degeneration of humanity began! Gold, that is, property and possessions, writes Lucretius (5.1113 ff.) produced greed and jealousy. Consequently "the power of strong and noble men" was undermined and the quality of life diminished.

Following Lucretius' social satire, Vergil, in the *Aeneid*, also suggests that the truly golden race ("aurea saecula") lived when times were tough and hard. When Evander shows Aeneas and Iulus the place destined to become the site of Rome, he tells them of a tribe of people untamed and living on mountains (8.319 ff.). They were governed by the primitive but good Saturnus, who established laws and produced peace. This race, unlike the one that succeeded it, did not know greed or wealth. In fact, says Evander, only when the "gold became tarnished" ("decolor") did greed and war arise.

While Lucretius and Vergil write about a golden age of long ago, the Augustan poet Ovid places the "age of gold" in his own time in several poems (though not in *Metamorphoses* 1). In the *Art of Love* (3.113) Ovid writes, "In the past there was crude simplicity, but now Rome is all gold!" Some have thought that Ovid's comments should be read at face value and that this "decadent and urban" poet expresses delight in living when and where he does. There is no nostalgia or hankering for the past, let alone moral posturing, but a revelling in the glory of the present. Ovid observes that he lives in a material golden age, when grand temples and palaces, precious metals and marble testify to the luxury and splendour of his dear city. Whatever the interpretation of these lines, it is striking that whereas earlier Latin poets wrote about the golden age as a time in the distant past, Ovid sees the golden age in the present. Elsewhere (*Art of Love* 2.227), with tongue firmly in cheek, he writes: "Now is truly the golden age, for glory is increased by gold (i.e., bought), and love is subservient to money." It is interesting to note that, in a manner typical of his style, Ovid inverts the golden age motif to comment upon the state of morality in contemporary Rome.

Not only is the golden age motif used in Latin poetry to comment upon past or present life, it is also linked to the promise of a better life ahead. On more than one occasion Vergil uses the motif as an ideal which may be attained. In *Aeneid* 6.791 ff., Anchises in the Underworld points out Caesar Augustus to Aeneas, and notes that he is destined to usher in the "golden age", an age of peace much like the time when Saturnus reigned. Here

Vergil associates the golden age with the Pax Romana, which the new "imperium" of Augustus will initiate. Thus the motif is not used in a pessimistic context, but in light of the promise of peace and stability. Similarly, in an earlier poem (the 4th *Eclogue*), the poet celebrates the birth of a child who will bring to an end the iron age and cause the golden race ("gens aurea", 8-10) to arise. That the poet thinks of possible change during his own lifetime is suggested by the statement that this age will arise during the consulship of Pollio (11-12). The child—whoever he may be—represents a return to the Italian virtues of the past. In the context of political propaganda, the golden age is placed not in the past, but in the future.