Then sprang up first the golden age, which of itself maintained
The truth and right of everything unforced and unconstrained.
There was no fear of punishment, there was no threatening law
In brazen tables nailed up, to keep the folk in awe.
There was no man would crouch or creep to judge with cap in hand,
They lived safe without a judge, in every realm and land.
The lofty pinetree was not hewn from mountains where it stood,
In seeking strange and foreign lands, to rove upon the flood.
Men knew none other countries yet than where themselves did keep;
There was no town enclosèd yet, with walls and ditches deep.
No horn nor trumpet was in use, no sword nor helmet worn;
The world was such that soldiers’ help might easily be forborn.
The fertile earth as yet was free, untouched of spade or plow,
And yet it yielded of itself of every things enow.²
And men themselves contented well with plain and simple food
That on the earth of nature’s gift without their travail stood,
Did live by raspès, hips, and haws, by cornels,³ plums, and cherries,
By sloes and apples, nuts and pears, and loathsome bramble berries,
And by the acorns dropped on ground from Jove’s broad tree⁴ in field.
The springtime lasted all the year, and Zephyr with his mild
And gentle blast did cherish things that grew of own accord;
The ground untilled all kinds of fruits did plenteously afford.
No muck nor tillage was bestowed on lean and barren land,

1. This selection is drawn from book 1.
2. Enough.
3. Raspberries, hips of wild roses, hawthorn buds, fruit of cornelian cherry.
4. Oak (called Arbor Jovis in Latin).
To make the corn\(^5\) of better head and ranker for to spread. 
Then streams ran milk, then streams ran wine, and yellow honey flowed 
From each green tree whereon the rays of fiery Phoebus glowed. 
But when that into limbo once Saturnus\(^6\) being thrust, 
The rule and charge of all the world was under Jove unjust. 
And that the silver age came in, more somewhat base than gold, 
More precious yet than freckled\(^7\) brass, immediately the old 
And ancient spring did Jove abridge,\(^8\) and made thereof anon 
Four seasons, winter, summer, spring, and autumn off and on. 
Then first of all began the air with fervent heat to swelt,\(^9\) 
Then icicles hung roping\(^1\) down; then for the cold was felt, 
Men gan to shroud themselves in house. Their houses were the thick\(^2\) 
And bushy queaches, hollow caves, or hardels made of sticks.\(^3\) 
Then first of all were furrows drawn, and corn was cast in ground. 
The simple ox, with sorry sighs, to heavy yoke was bound. 
Next after this succeeded straight\(^4\) the third and brazen age, 
More hard of nature, somewhat bent to cruel wars and rage, 
But yet not wholly past all grace. Of iron is the last, 
In no part good and tractable as former ages past. 
For when that of this wicked age once opened was the vein, 
Therein all mischief rushèd forth; then faith and truth were fain, 
And honest shame, to hide their heads, for whom crept stoutly in, 
Craft, treason, violence, envy, pride, and wicked lust to win. 
The shipman hoist his sails to wind, whose names he did not know, 
And ships that erst\(^5\) in tops of hills and mountains had ygrow, 
Did leap and dance on uncouth\(^6\) waves, and men began to bound 
With dools\(^7\) and ditches drawn in length the free and fertile ground 
Which was as common as the air and light of sun before.

5. Grain. 
7. Light brown, mottled. 
8. Shorten. 
1. Dangling, like the end of a rope. 
2. Thickets. 
4. Immediately. 
5. Formerly. 
6. Unfamiliar. 
7. Boundary marks between fields.
Not only corn and other fruits, for sustenance and for store,
Were now exacted of the earth, but eft\textsuperscript{8} they gan to dig 155
And in the bowels of the ground unsatiably to rig
For riches couched and hidden deep, in places near to Hell,
The spurs and stirrers unto vice and foes to doing well.
Then hurtful iron came abroad, then came forth yellow gold,
More hurtful than the iron far; then came forth battle bold, 160
That fights with both, and shakes his sword in cruel bloody hand.
Men live by ravine\textsuperscript{9} and by stealth; the wandering guest doth stand
In danger of his host, the host in danger of his guest,
And fathers of their son-in-laws, yet seldom time doth rest
Between born brothers such accord and love as ought to be. 165
The goodman seeks the goodwife’s death, and his again seeks she.
The stepdames fell\textsuperscript{1} their husband’s sons with poison do assail.
To see their fathers live so long the children do bewail.
All godliness lies under foot, And Lady Astre\textsuperscript{2} last
Of heavenly virtues, from this earth in slaughter drownèd past. 170

\textsuperscript{8} Soon. “Exacted”: extracted.
\textsuperscript{9} Violence.
\textsuperscript{1} Evil, wicked.
\textsuperscript{2} Astrea, goddess of justice. In classical mythology she lived on earth in the Golden Age, but when wickedness increased, she withdrew to heaven.