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# Early Greek Lyric Poetry: *Individualism Emergent*

Additional evidence of the course taken by Greek culture after the Homeric Age is found in the poetry of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. These poets belong to a different age, and they respond to different needs. Hesiod, in his *Works and Days,* had been the first Greek poet to turn from the impersonal narration of great deeds, in the manner of Homer, to the expression of his own individual experience. In the following opening lines from his other long poem, the *Theogony,* which traces the history of the divine government of the universe to the point at which it culminates in the benevolent monarchy of Zeus, Hesiod describes the new role of poetry as the expression of a deep personal reaction to life. His view anticipates the later doctrine of Aristotle's *Poetics* that has ever remained an important element in art criticism — a work of art is the product of a sensitive person's attempt to purge himself of, and thereby gain relief from, the intense emotions aroused within him by significant personal experience.

Oh, blessed is the man
Whome'er the Muses love! Sweet is the voice
That from his lips flows ever. Is there one
Who hides some grief in his wounded mind
And mourns with aching heart? . . .Straight he feels
His sorrow stealing in forgetfulness:
Nor of his griefs remembers aught: so soon
The Muses' gift has turned his woes away.

The poets who follow Hesiod intensify this exploration of purely individual experience. With the old way of life now lost, and living amidst the upheaval caused by political, social, and spiritual change, these poets express in new literary forms a corresponding turbulence of beliefs and emotions. They reject old values, cry out in pain over life's woes, sing gaily of romantic love and flowing wine, and lament the inevitable coming of old age.

## A. *Archilochus*

The poetry of Archilochus of Paros (early seventh century B.C.) illustrates clearly the complete change in conditions and in poetic expression that has come about since the bygone Homeric Age. The illegitimate son of an aristocratic father and a slave mother, he became an outcast and a wanderer over land and sea. His poetry — perhaps the first of its type — reflects an exultant individualism that holds firm in the face both of the loss of old heroic values and the storm and stress of the new times.

THE LOST SHIELD

The foeman glories in my shield;
I left it in the battle-field;
I threw it down beside the wood,
Unscathed by scars, unstained by blood:
And let him glory, since from death
Escaped, I keep my forfeit breath.
I soon may find, at little cost,
As good a shield as that I've lost.

*Trans.* J. H. Merivale

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF FORTUNE

O heart, my heart, by hopeless woes oppressed,
Rise up, take guard, offer the foe your breast!
Stand firmly where the spears of battle fly;
But, if you conquer, never glorify
Yourself, nor, overcome, lie down and wail
At home. In joys take joy, and if you fail,
Grieve not too much, but know what fortunes men assail.

## B. *Mimnermus*

In the poetry of Mimnermus of Colophon in Asia Minor (late seventh century B.C.), the earlier exuberant individualism of Archilochus is replaced by a note of sadness for the briefness of youth and joy. The romantic joy of living is still proclaimed, but it is tempered by a touch of melancholic world-weariness.

YOUTH AND AGE

Oh what is life by golden love unblest?
Better be mine the grave's eternal rest.
The furtive kiss, soft pledge and genial tie,
Are flowers of youth, that passing smile and die:
Old age succeeds, and dulls each finer sense,
When all we hope, at most, is reverence.
Age brings misfortune clearer to our sight,
Damps every joy and dims the cheerful light,
And scatters frowns, and thins the silvery hair,
Hateful to youth, unlovely to the fair.

*Trans.* Robert Bland

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LIKE THE LEAVES

We, like the leaves of many-blossomed Spring,
When the sun's rays their sudden radiance fling
In growing strength, on earth, a little while,
Delighted, see youth's blooming flowerets smile.
Not with that wisdom of the Gods endued,
To judge aright of evil and of good.
Two Fates, dark-scowling, at our side attend;
Of youth, of life, each points the destined end,
Old age and death: the fruit of youth remains
Brief, as the sunshine scattered o'er the plains:
And when these fleeting hours have sped away,
To die were better than to breathe the day.
A load of grief the burdened spirit wears;
Domestic troubles rise; penurious cares;
One with an earnest love of children sighs;
The grave is opened and he childless dies:
Another drags in pain his lingering days,
While slow disease upon his vitals preys.
Nor lives there one, whom Jupiter on high
Exempts from years of mixt calamity.

*Trans.* C. A. Elton

## C. *Sappho*

Sappho lived at the end of the seventh century B.C. in Mitylene on the island of Lesbos, where she conducted a school for girls. She is the first and perhaps the greatest of all women poets. Her theme is love and loveliness, and no one has ever explored this theme with deeper passion, more delicate grace and simplicity in the choice of words, richer imagination, or greater beauty. The romantic love that is Sappho's theme is not found in Homer or in any heroic-age poetry (see, for example, Selection 1, p. 3). In Homer, Helen is unwillingly carried off to Troy by Paris, but in Sappho's revised version she willingly leaves husband and family "all for love."

FAIR HELEN, ALL FOR LOVE

She, who the beauty of mankind
Excelled, fair Helen, all for love
The noblest husband left behind;
Afar, to Troy she sailed away,
Her child, her parents, clean forgot;

"Fair Helen, All for Love" is from A. R. Burn, *The Lyric Age of Greece* (London: Edward Arnold, Ltd., 1961), p. 236. Reprinted by permission of Edward Arnold, Ltd.

The Cyprian[1] led her far astray
Out of the way, resisting not.

THE FAIREST THING ON EARTH

Some say the fairest thing on earth is a troop of horsemen,
others a band of foot-soldiers,
others a squadron of ships.
But I say the fairest thing is the beloved.

WHEN I SEE YOU

When I even see you,
my voice stops,
my tongue is broken,
a thin flame runs beneath all my skin,
my eyes are blinded,
there is thunder in my ears,
the sweat pours from me,
I tremble through and through,
I am paler than grass,
and I seem almost like one dead.

LOVE RENDS ME

Lo, Love once more my soul within me rends
Like wind that on the mountain oak descends.

*Trans.* John Addington Symonds

THE MOON IS SET

The silver moon is set;
The Pleiades are gone;
Half the long night is spent, and yet
I lie alone.

*Trans.* J. H. Merivale

## D. *Theognis*

Theognis of Megara, near Athens, was a sixth-century aristocrat who filled his verse with outraged bitterness toward the lower classes and their tyrant leaders (see Selection 21), under whom he suffered confiscation of property and exile. Although he claims to be no narrow reactionary "leaguing with the proud and arbitrary few" but a moderate who will "incline to neither side," Theognis expresses the ultra-conservative

[1]Aphrodite, goddess of love.

"The Fairest Thing on Earth" and "When I See You" are from Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol. I, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 135. Reprinted by permission of Basil Blackwell, London.

viewpoint on social and political change; to him the nobles are always "good" and the commoners are always "base."

### "A DISCONTENTED CRY FILLS ALL THE EARTH"

This is Theognis, the Megarian poet,
So celebrated and renowned in Greece!
Yet some there are, forsooth, I cannot please;
Nor ever could contrive, with all my skill,
To gain the common liking and goodwill
Of these my fellow-citizens. — No wonder!
Not even he, the god that wields the thunder,
The sovereign all-wise, almighty Jove,
Can please them with his government above:
Some call for rainy weather, some for dry,
A discontented and discordant cry
Fills all the earth, and reaches to the sky. . . .
To rear a child is easy, but to teach
Morals and manners is beyond our reach;
To make the foolish wise, the wicked good,
That science never yet was understood.
The sons of Aesculapius, if their art
Could remedy a perverse and wicked heart,
Might earn enormous wages! . . .

### "OUR COMMON PEOPLE ARE NO MORE THE SAME"

Our Commonwealth preserves its former frame,
Our common people are no more the same:
They that in skins and hides were rudely dressed,
Nor dreamt of law, nor sought to be redressed
By rules of right, but in the days of old
Flocked to the town, like cattle to the fold,
Are now the brave and wise; and we the rest,
Their betters nominally, once the best,
Degenerate, debased, timid, mean!
Who can endure to witness such a scene? . . .

### "I INCLINE TO NEITHER SIDE"

I walk by rule and measure, and incline
To neither side, but take an even line;
Fix'd in a single purpose and design,
With learning's happy gifts to celebrate,
To civilize and dignify the state:
Not leaguing with the discontented crew,
Nor with the proud and arbitrary few. . . .
Waste not your efforts, struggle not, my friend,
Idle and old abuses to defend:

Take heed! the very measures that you press
May bring repentance with their own success.

### "ZEUS, I MARVEL AT THY WAYS"

Blessed, almighty Zeus! With deep amaze
I view the world; — and marvel at thy ways!
All our devices, every subtle plan,
Each secret act, and all the thoughts of man,
Your boundless intellect can comprehend!
On your award our destinies depend.
How can you reconcile it to your sense
Of right and wrong, thus loosely to dispense
Your bounties on the wicked and the good?
How can your laws be known or understood?
When we behold a man faithful and just,
Humbly devout, true to his word and trust,
Dejected and oppressed; — whilst the profane,
And wicked and unjust, in glory reign,
Proudly triumphant, flushed with power and gain,
What inference can human reason draw?
How can we guess the secret of the law,
Or choose the path approved by power divine? . . .
Not to be born — never to see the sun —
No worldly blessing is a greater one!
And the next best is speedily to die,
And lapt beneath a load of earth to lie!

### "LONGING AGAIN TO VIEW THIS LAND OF MINE"

You, great Apollo, with its walls and towers
Fenc'd and adorn'd of old this town of ours! . . .
Yet much I fear the faction and the strife,
Throughout our Grecian cities, raging rife,
And their wild councils. But do thou defend
This town of ours, our founder and our friend!
Wide have I wander'd, far beyond the sea,
Even to the distant shores of Sicily,
To broad Euboea's plentiful domain,
With the rich vineyards in its planted plain;
And to the sunny wave and winding edge
Of fair Eurotas, with its reedy sedge;
Where Sparta stands in simple majesty,
Among her manly rulers, there was I!
Greeted and welcom'd (there and everywhere)
With courteous entertainment, kind and fair;

Yet still my weary spirit would repine,
Longing again to view this land of mine.

*Trans.* J. H. Frere

## E. *Anacreon*

The story goes that Anacreon of Teos in Asia Minor died in 490 B.C. at the ripe old age of eighty-five by choking on a grape seed found in his wine — a fitting death for a voluptuary whose only aim in life was to "enjoy the day" and be "a devotee of Bacchus decently." In Anacreon's verse, Greek lyric poetry has lost the power and genuine depth of feeling that Archilochus had expressed almost two centuries earlier; the developing Greek genius was turning to other forms of literary expression, notably the drama.

### THE THEME I SING

Give me the harp of epic song,
Which Homer's finger thrilled along;
But tear away the sanguine string,
For war is not the theme I sing.
Proclaim the laws of festal right,
I'm monarch of the board tonight;
And all around shall brim as high,
And quaff the tide as deep as I.
And when the cluster's mellowing dews
Their warm enchanting balm infuse,
Our feet shall catch the elastic bound,
And reel us through the dance's round.
Great Bacchus! we shall sing to thee,
In wild but sweet ebriety;
Flashing around such sparks of thought,
As Bacchus could alone have taught.
Then, give the harp of epic song,
Which Homer's finger thrilled along;
But tear away the sanguine string,
For war is not the theme I sing.

*Trans.* Thomas Moore

### LET US THE FESTAL HOURS BEGUILE

I care not for the idle state
Of Persia's king, the rich, the great:
I envy not the monarch's throne,
Nor wish the treasured gold my own.
But Oh! be mine the rosy wreath,

Its freshness o'er my brow to breathe;
Be mine the rich perfumes that flow,
To cool and scent my locks of snow.
Today I'll haste to quaff my wine,
And if tomorrow comes, why then —
I'll haste to quaff my wine again.
And thus while all our days are bright,
Let us the festal hours beguile
With mantling cup and cordial smile;
And shed from each new bowl of wine
The richest drop on Bacchus' shrine.
For Death may come, with brow unpleasant,
May come, when least we wish him present,
And beckon to the sable shore,
And grimly bid us — drink no more!

*Trans.* Thomas Moore

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# Solon: *The Athenian New Deal*

Later Greeks looked back upon Solon as the greatest of statesmen and the wisest of men. Such renown was well deserved. He was called upon to save Athens at a moment of severe crisis in 594 B.C. when civil war between an oppressed peasantry and an avaricious aristocracy was beginning to threaten the destruction of the state. The crisis had been long preparing. During the seventh century the Athenian nobility had steadily reduced the power of the king to the point at which they could finally eliminate him altogether. His powers were taken over by noble magistrates, called archons, who were the dependable agents of the aristocratic Council of the Areopagus. The old Homeric-style popular assembly sank into virtual oblivion, and the lower classes suffered oppression in the manner described by Hesiod. Most of them lost their lands, many became sharecroppers, and a large number were finally reduced to debt-slavery. About 632 B.C. Cylon sought unsuccessfully to capitalize on the discontent of the lower classes to make himself tyrant. This event appears to have frightened the nobility into compromising by allowing an archon named Draco in 621 B.C. to put into written form the hitherto unwritten customary laws. This was to prevent the aristocratic magistrates from administering the laws unjustly after the manner of the judges who, as described by Hesiod, "devour bribes

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From Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, "Solon," based on the translation by John Dryden and A. H. Clough.