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Solon (638 B.C.-558 B.C.)

The outburst of fine lyric, in the thawing Archaic Age of Greece, largely took place outside Athens: on the Asia Minor coast, on the Greek islands—Lesbos and Paros, in the cases of Sappho and Archilochos—while Athens remained behind in this development. It was the Athenian victory over Megara, for possession of Salamis, that brought Solon and the Athenian lyric to the fore. In 590 Solon was appointed Chief Magistrate for the year, in Athens, and tasked to bring harmony between the rival social groups—rich and poor—whose mutual hostility threatened to break out into Civil War. Solon describes his efforts, to pursue this policy, in largely grave and self-reflective iambs—again regular and organized in pattern—and in a discursive style which foreshadows the dialogue of characters in Greek tragedy a century later. For the range in Solon, consider the following:

This man Solon is a shallow thinker and a fool;
for the gods give him great goods, but he does not take them.
He throws a great net around his prey, but then does not draw it in,
He has neither good sense nor the will to use it.
If I came to power, I'd grab all I could,
tyrannizing the Athenians if even for one day only,
even if I and my family were later to be flayed into a wineskin.

Self-reflective irony of this stripe is rare in earlier Greek poetry. In the Homeric epic there is no room for authorial voice, let alone for self-irony, because the narrator is cloaked behind the vast verbal panoply he cedes to the Muse. Poets like Sappho and Archilochos display many ranges of subtle feeling, but they do not include reflection onto the voice expressing that feeling. Solon strikes a note that all of us today will recognize as a self-conscious, and more than a little self-critical, move. The development of irony was fitful and broken in ancient Greek culture. Odysseus, in Homer's *Odyssey*, reflects on himself, sometimes ironically, and tragic dramatists like Euripides create characters who reflect on themselves, but on the whole ancient Greek literature creates its clearest effects by direct and profound statement.