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GREEK LYRIC POETRY

Archilochos, Sappho, Solon, Herondas

The explosion of lyric poetry, in early Greece, is a sign of the emergence of a new culture of individualism. (The lyric bears its maker's stamp directly, unlike the epic or drama, which mediate the maker's voice through characters and plots). Among the many brilliant lyric poets, who remain to us from as early as the seventh century B.C. four can represent the wide range of this lyrical achievement.

A**rchilochos and the remains of his work**. We know one date in Archilochos' life, 648 B.C., the occasion of a total eclipse of the sun over the Aegaean: 'Nothing in the world can surprise me now…for Zeus, father of the Olympians, has turned midday into black night by shielding light from the blossoming sun, and now dark terror hangs over mankind…' Apart from that event, what we know of Archilochos comes from his own poems. The evidence we deduce from Archilochos' poems themselves suggests he was a mercenary soldier, that on one occasion he had thrown away his shield and fled from battle, that he had a great love for Neoboule (not 'romance'), that he preferred short tough individualistic fighting men to aristocratic pretty boys, and so on: from his remaining poems and fragments we can create the profile of a Thasian fighting man with such and such traits.

The fox knows many tricks, the hedgehog only one.
One good one.

Sappho and her work. Like Archilochos, Sappho (630?-570 B.C.) is hard to reconstruct. If we can take our texts at face value, we presume that Sappho was a lady of distinguished rank, living a privileged life on the island of Lesbos, and that she was a member of a coterie of sophisticated female peers, with whom she shares strong passions—perhaps in the setting of the awaiting of marriages, which will separate them. Hence, much longing, much concern about loss, much delicate feeling interwoven with the metrical form we call Sapphic. The rest, as they say, is pure poetry, standard setting for all time, and untranslatable.

Like the very gods in my sight is he who
sits where he can look in your eyes, who listens
close to you, to hear the soft voice, its sweetness
murmur in love and

laughter, all for him. But it breaks my spirit;
underneath my breast all the heart is shaken.
let me only glance where you are, the voice dies,
I can say nothing,

but my lips are stricken to silence, under-
neath my skin the tenuous flame suffuses;
nothing shows in front of my eyes, my ears are
muted in thunder.

And the sweat breaks running upon me, fever
shakes my body, paler I turn than grass is;
I can feel that I have been changed, I feel that
death has come near me.

Solon. In 590 B.C. 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 totally unfamiliar from earlier Greek poetry. In the Homeric epic there is no room for authorial voice, because the narrator is cloaked behind the vast 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 move toward 'the modern tone.'

Herondas. Like Solon, Herondas, writing three centuries later, has his creative eye on the social scene. But while Solon was a poet/law giver/ reformer Herondas is a sophisticated observer, worldly to the last iamb. The first of his poetic mimes—short, poetic plays--shows you how Herondas touches the depths of society; bawdiness, lust, and innuendo flowing through every word. In his manner of presenting this material, Herondas speaks for an artistic age, the Hellenistic, which pushes the limits of art, addresses the retro, self-involved pleasures of the artist in an age which f*ollows* the great achievements of classical culture. Herondas is creating at a time when genre *sculpture* abounds. Hellenistic sculptors portrayed subjects unknown in the high classical period…foreigners (such as the dying Gaul), drunkards, battered athletes, wrinkled old people. The pristine age of idealized nude sculptures has given way to the unique/eye-catching, just as the lyric of Solonian Athens, grave and yet artful, has given way to the mime poetry of an age full of curiosity, libido, and *interest*.

Reading

Santos, Sherod, *Greek Lyric Poetry: A New Translation* (New York, 2006).

Campbell, David, ed. *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Bristol, 2003).

Davenport, Guy, *Seven Greeks: Archilochos, Sappho, Alkman, Anacreon, Herakleitos, Diogenes, Herondas* (New York, l995).

Discussion questions

Do you feel you can come in contact with Archilochos and Sappho as 'persons,' and not just as formal poets, whose work has survived for us in fragmentary form? Is the formidable distance ,that separates us from these individuals, crossable?

What do you think of the translations of these poets you are reading, They are important vehicles, no? Are you on the side of literal translation? Have you checked out several different versions of the same poem?

Would Herondas' kind of camp social critique have been possible at an earlier stage of Greek culture than his, or was his critique tied to the sophisticated, 'post-classical' high-culture tone of the Alexandrian Age? What about reversing the question, to apply to Solon? Would his fairly stark, though artful, poems about

justice and civil war have been possible at the time of Herondas? Or were they tied to the formative stage of the Greeks when a father-figure thinker was needed to lead the way into a new cultural stage?