HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Mimnermus (fl. 630-600 B.C.)

Mimnermus was born in either Colophon or Smyrna, in Asia Minor, but beyond that fact nothing firm is clear about his life. What we know of his work is scattered in fragments, though a couple of wholes remain; we know that he was admired in ancient tradition as one of the greatest lyric poets. (The eminent British classicist, Sir Maurice Bowra, considered Mimnermus and Archilochos the most talented ears in the Greek lyric corpus.) We are clear that Mimnermus preferred short poems, frequently tailored thematically for drinking parties, and that the jewel like perfection of these poems exercised a strong influence on the Hellenistic Greek poet, Callimachus (#67), as well as on the Roman lyricist Propertius. The fact is, it seems that Mimnermus' poems were not—just as Anacreon's poems were not—clarion cries to the hedonist in each of us. Mimnermus is too subtle for that, and, as in the poem below, is careful to define the kind of hedonism he values—a hedonism free of the aches and pains of old age, a longing for bodily health, a longing which the poet Solon criticizes as cowardly. And yet it is not to be forgotten that Mimnermus lived in an age when the sexual could be addressed head on; witness, in his case, a poem which works through thematic variations on the proverbial notion that 'a lame man makes the best lover.'

What is life, what is sweet, if it is missing golden Aphrodite?

Death would be better by far than to live with no time for
Amorous assignations and the gift of tenderness and bedrooms,

All of those things that give youth all of its covetted bloom,
Both for men and for women. But when there arrives the vexatiousness

Of old age, even good looks alter to unsightliness
And the heart wears away under the endlessness of its anxieties:

There is no joy anymore then in the light of the sun;
In children there is found hate and in women there is found no respect.

So difficult has old age been made for us all by God!