

# GREEK POETRY

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**Overview** The great epics of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were parts of a vast ‘epic cycle’ which was composed in early Greece, on the whole perhaps somewhat later than Homer’s work, which was first written down in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Though these epics—the *Cypria*, the *Aethiopis*, the *Ilioupersis*, and several others—remain only in fragments, we know both from those fragments, many of them appended to Homer texts in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., and from scattered references in Greek texts from the time of the Library of Alexandria on, that the material of this ‘epic cycle’ was largely concerned with the events around the besieging and taking of Troy, and the returning home of the Greek warriors, post-war. From the existence of this cycle, we conclude that there was a loose confederation of oral bards, of whom Homer was one, who plied their trade to aristocratic audiences up and down the Asia Minor coast and the eastern Mediterranean in early Iron Age Greece.

Why did the texts of Homer survive, inspirational and funny to our time, while serving for their own culture as foundations of art, law texts, history books, and guides to the nature of the gods? We have to guess that the reason why Homer alone survived, of the many poems that composed the ‘epic cycle,’ is his genius, and mastery of the dactylic hexameter, though we cannot be sure of that. Whatever the now lost explanation for Homer’s survival we can feel sure that the qualities that drove his text were of unique and universal importance.

In the *Iliad*, Homer deals—and on the highest artistic level—with ‘eternal themes’: war, lust, battle, heroism, love, self-sacrifice. The same poet who can introduce us to the volatile brilliance and passion of Achilles, can rub our noses in the nitty gritty of cavalry warfare, or the humble pie Priam must eat, in order to beg Achilles for the return of the body of Hector.

Homer’s *Odyssey* is as rich as the *Iliad*, in universal values, and for many listeners and readers strikes home more intimately than do the martial themes of the *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey* we track the ten year homeward journey of one of the Greek warriors at Troy, Odysseus. This man ‘of many wiles’ must pass through fantastic challenges on his ocean return, not the least of which is a multi-year sojourn on a goddess’ island, barely fending off the promise of immortality. In the end Odysseus must show himself capable of the ultimate show of strength, by stringing and shooting the bow that none of the suitors in his household could deal with. Odysseus, wily, subtle, cruel, faithful, remains one of western literature’s keystones of literary power.

## Readings

Gilbert Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, Oxford, 1924

Burgess, Jonathan, *The tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle*, Johns Hopkins, 2003

### **Discussion questions**

What, about Homer's two epics, would qualify them to become a kind of 'Bible for the Greeks,' in the later pre-Christian centuries? There are many practical messages in Homer's work, but is there a religious message, a wisdom about the gods?

Samuel Butler's work, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897), makes a startling claim for the feminine authorship of that epic. Please investigate his book. First, though, give some thought to his proposition: do you see some evidence, in the *Odyssey*, of a female creator?

## Homer, The Iliad

**Homer and his tradition.** The Greek epic imagination launches with the genius of Homer. We are still not certain of the identity of this creator, or whether he composed in writing or orally, but we know that in the late eighth century B.C. he wrote down some version of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the two greatest milestones in Greek literature—and in fact in Greek culture. It was not, of course, that this creation emerged out of the blue, for in fact Archaic Greek culture had by 700 B.C. been developing for at least a millennium on the Greek mainland, and there had long been a rich oral epic tradition in northern areas of what would later become Greece. And that is only a short sighted view of the epic tradition that was ‘behind’ Homer. Behind the Greek epic tradition was a mighty volume of Ancient Near Eastern epic texts, many of them lost in the sands of the Middle East, which included such masterworks as the Babylonian Creation Story (*Enuma Elish*) or *Gilgamesh*, a literary exploration of fundamental human themes—immortality, lust, personal integrity-- composed one millennium before Homer’s work. That Mesopotamian background clearly empowered the epic imagination which grew from the various culture creative people who occupied the Ancient Near East. *Language growth* was another factor in making the Greek epic imagination effective. The great ancient epics were originally created by massive feats of oral memory, but by the time of the Homeric ‘recension,’ putting these texts together in the late eighth century, an elegant and efficient alphabetic system, like the Greek, was available and had been found invaluable for communication. The development of that code system, out of an ancient history leading through cuneiform and hieroglyphic traditions, eventually into a Phoenician waystage, required millennia of experiment and ingenuity. Even a native genius like Homer was dependent on the tireless creative efforts of his language making predecessors.

**The narrative of the Iliad.** We open with arguably the greatest of Homer’s works, the *Iliad*, or the epic about the ‘Fall of Troy.’ The historic ‘Fall’—traditionally located by the Greeks as from the twelfth cent. B.C.—brought together a set of local Greek power lords and retainers, whose interest was in the wealth and shipping control of Troy itself, strategically located on the shores of the Bosphorus. A myth, which dominates Homer’s account of the Greek commercial/military venture, holds that Alexander, the son of the King of Troy, stole Helen, the glamorous wife of the Greek warlord Menelaus, and carried her off to Troy as his love-toy. The story of the subsequent expedition against Troy, and the defeat of the city and its rulers, would by this myth be a byproduct of commercial adventure; only by Homer’s vision transmuted into a powerful story of action, military courage and brutality, sexual passion, and ultimately regions of self-sacrifice that touch the lives of all of us. The *Iliad* can be read as pure absorbing fiction in dactylic hexameters, or as an account of the historical movement of peoples in the mid second millennium, an account referring back to an event six to eight hundred years earlier than Homer’s own time.

**The hexameter.** The final preliminary note should concern the dactylic hexameter. A long epic line, typically broken in two parts, was the vehicle of Homer’s creation and of the professional bards who recited epic tales as entertainment throughout Greek antiquity. The hexameter itself is an easily memorizable line, with infinite subtlety for tone and implication. We are to imagine the epic typically performed to the strumming of the lyre, and by a highly experienced professional, who measured his success by the muscular acclaim of his all male upper class warrior audiences. Imagine it, veteran warriors quaffing their Samnian wine as they delight in sung poetry of great finesse!

### Reading

Taken from the internet on 12 24 12 , the following mini-blog indicates the currency of the continuing effort to translate Homer into living English. [www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2011/11/englishing-the-iliad.htm](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2011/11/englishing-the-iliad.htm)

There is a brilliant legacy of Homer translations in English, dating back to Chapman in the Renaissance, and, two centuries later, Alexander Pope, whose superb *Iliad* bristles with the elegances of his own time’s classically educated language. Among the fine contemporary English translations of the *Iliad* known to me, the best are those of: Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1951), Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1974), and Robert Fagles (New York, 1990). These translations are all made by accomplished Greek scholars, and fine poets. Please outfit yourself with one of these translations, and read the whole *Iliad* this week!

## Discussion

The central question raised by the epic is this: what leads Achilles to return the body to Hector to Priam at the end of the epic? Is there here a breakthrough into compassion and pity? (If so, does this seem a unique expression of pity for the *Iliad*? Or are there other examples of pity in the poem?) Or if not into pity, is there here at the epic's end a softening in the heart of a brilliant, doomed, and hypersensitive hero, who is part divine? We can use touchstones like this question to evaluate the kind of moral achievement valued by the ancient Greeks. When you get to the tragic hero, and his/her ultimate encounter with death and finitude, will wisdom in a wide sense take over? What is wisdom for the ancient Greek mind? Is it anything like 'religious understanding,' as we might term it?

## Homer *The Odyssey*

**Narrative of the Odyssey.** Among the Greek warriors at Troy, who came from different aristocratic walled centers on the Greek mainland, came many leaders who felt themselves aggrieved by the 'rape of Helen,' or the 'rape of their commercial vigor,' however the loss is described. Among these independent warriors was Odysseus, lord of the manor on the island of Ithaca. As a supporter of Agamemnon, the overall head of the Greek expedition, Odysseus was a team player, until Troy fell; but after that Fall—once again the date given by the Greeks to the event was the twelfth century B.C., the Bronze Age—the Greek warriors dispersed, heading back toward their homeland and local communities. In the accounts of this return Homer collects memories lodged deep in the Greek folk memory, recollections of periods of naval adventure, seafaring trade, and commercial rivalry; Homer blends these memories into a coherent whole around the half-'real' half-fictive adventures of a warrior whose courage, sense of irony, and passionate life-love have made him for subsequent world literature a brilliant symbol. You will see, as you follow the narrative of *The Odyssey*, that Homer exposes this fictive personage—whose name means 'the angry one'—to trials which bring out his character, and with it the salient value traits of the Bronze Age Greek world, the world known to us through archeological discovery and the vast remains of those Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations, which were the formative social/political units in Greece, during the perhaps six hundred years between the Trojan War and the time of the writing down of the Homeric epics in the eighth century B.C.

**The human content of the Odyssey.** Without spoiling the text by retelling stories here, we may draw your attention to a kind of dimension, prevalent in the *Odyssey*—also in the *Iliad*—which is behind the universal greatness of this text. Odysseus is at one point a guest in the kingdom of the Phaeacians, an idyllic culture given to dance and music and the gentle life; he has just survived a harrowing battle with the waves at sea. Seated next to the King, at a vast board of victuals, Odysseus is delighted to hear the bard—for there was always musical entertainment at grandee feasts—recount the details of a hero's wandering, a hero who turns out, as the song proceeds, to be Odysseus himself. The reader/hearer of the epic thrills to the dimensionality of the text, where Homer winks at us across the character of Odysseus who is winking at us across the irony of listening in delighted silence to a validating tale of himself at sea, a tale which rescues the hero from all the anonymity of endurance on the fishy brine.

**The hexameter as core of the poem.** Once again the hexameter is the unsung hero of the epic, the base against which the music of the tale is told. Since we are in this course reading great literature in translation, and thus perforce responding repeatedly to the 'great vision and theme,' it is appropriate also to remind ourselves of the precise product we are passing across. The hexameter is a line of six cola—six metrical units—of which the basic foot is long/short/short, where length refers to length of time required to produce the syllable in question. There is great variation in the blend of cola lengths, with the result that the tale sung in dactyls is flexible and lengthy. Among the devices chosen to hold the line under control are the cesura which divides the line in two, and continually falls at a different place, and the insertion of formulaic material, which is a hallmark of the Greek epic, and provides for ready made half cola, guarantees of recurrence and traditional repetition. The translations we will use, in the epic section of this course, will to some extent capture the logistics of the Greek epic forms. You will see from our comments on Week Five, on Pindar, what different strategies came to be used by the masters of the epic imagination.

## Reading

Robert Fitzgerald's translation of the *Odyssey* (New York, 1974) is my own favorite, for its precision and beauty and care for sentiment. But there are a number of outstanding modern translations of this epic—how better could the poem prove its greatness?—and you might even sample the prose version by A.S. Kline, online, a recent and practical version. *Highly recommended*: Stephen Mitchell (New York, 2011) and Robert Fagles (New York, 1990). Also highly recommended: *The Odyssey* of Homer, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York, 1987). (Please read the entire epic this week.)

## Discussion

*The Odyssey* has always been your instructor's favorite work of Greek literature! Why? It is dramatic, funny, adventurous, alert to the energy and ingenuity of life, deeply poetic: and rewarded, because throughout Western cultural tradition Odysseus has persisted as the most germinal source for new understandings of the human possibility. Does any 'figure' in the *Iliad* catch your attention with his/her humanity in the manner of Odysseus?

## Hesiod Works and Days; Theogony

**The epic poet as Muse possessed.** The epic imagination, as tracked in the creations of Homer, had been passed down for centuries by rhapsodes, professional singers of the sort we noted in connection with the Phaeacian tale in *The Odyssey*. During this long period, it was customary for the epic creator to address his poem, at the beginning, as if he were not an individual creator but a channel for the inspiration of the Muses. (The Muses themselves were offspring of the goddess Mnemosyne, which means ‘memory.’) Thus the *Iliad* opens with ‘*menin aeide thea*’...’sing to me goddess of the wrath of...’ while the *Odyssey* opens with ‘*andra moi ennepe, Mousa...*’ ‘of that man sing to me, O muse...’ But that initiatory formula is not the only pattern available to the Greek epic poet, though it is a pattern reminiscent of a culture world in which individualism is sharply subordinated to the codes of the whole culture. The epic poet Hesiod (seventh century B.C.), creating in the same formulaic hexameter as Homer, speaks to us as an *individual* voice with no pretensions to channeling inspiration. It is not that he has no higher pretensions, for in fact he believes the Muses have given him the power to ‘sing the story of things, the future and the past,’ but he is quite clear that he, a Boeotian herdsman and narrator from a wretched farmland near the village of Ascra (Boondocksville!), *has been given his power by the Muses*. The Muses do not sing through Hesiod, but empower *him* to sing.

**Import of Hesiod’s epics.** What remains to us, from that empowerment, is two small epics, *The Works and Days* and the *Theogony*, both of which you will read this week. The *Theogony* describes the origins of the universe out of chaos, the gradual power take-over by the Olympian gods, the struggles that pit Ouranus against Cronos, and fitfully usher in the current interrelated pantheon of the Olympian gods. As you read this poem, which may seem arid in the way (to many of us today) we find the genealogical lineages in the first books of the Old Testament, you may want to reflect on the fruitfulness of this work for the growth of the first Greek philosophy, which (ahead Week Six) will employ, in its search for a first principle (*arche*), the same kind of research thinking that generates Hesiod’s *arche* of Chaos, his first principle, from which all else grew. But that fruitfulness is not the only cultural value of Hesiod’s work. He packs into this epic not only a mythography of the lineage of the gods, but he enriches his argument, that reason and justice on the whole, in the end, prevail, with a counter vision of the progressive decline of the state of mankind from an original Golden State to the condition of Bronze in which humanity currently finds itself. In other words Hesiod is creating a conscious and analytical—if somewhat inconsistent—theology from within the center of the Greek mythical perspective. You will at once distinguish this personal statement, of an individual representative of his society, from the on-high channeling of the great epic poetry of Homer, and while you will (doubtless?) be swept up by Homer’s narrative, and hardly by Hesiod’s, you will reflect that the pathways of personal individuation, which were to lead into the ‘modern world’ of fifth century B.C. Athens, were trodden by free thinking individuals (like Hesiod), more than by singers in the great epic tradition.

**Tenor of Hesiod’s epic work.** *The Works and Days* narrates out from a grudge argument against a brother who has dealt inequitably with the narrator, Hesiod, and from there the poem continues to discuss issues for the agricultural householder of the time: when to plant, when to plow, how to use the knowledge of the stars for sea travel, how to bend to the unavoidable dictates of fate. The tenor of this poem is that of a Yankee farmer writing in formal hexameter lines, bowing his head—as do all farmers—to the fate the environment provides them, and writing with sustained fealty to the plans of the gods. We can hardly imagine a perspective less Homeric, less regally formulated. Nor are we sure whether to include Hesiod, as well as Homer, under the rubric of epic imagination. The hexameter is the force that binds Homer to Hesiod as part of a distinctive genre for seeing the world.

**Hesiod’s imagination and that of the Romantic Movement.** The point comes right here, in offering the introductory material of this syllabus, when we have to face the issue of ‘imagination,’ as bannered in our presentation of our major categories. Explaining what we mean by these categories was made more difficult by the meaning of *imagination* established during the critical thought of the Romantic movement in Europe. What Wordsworth and Coleridge meant by imagination, as they promoted the term in the early nineteenth century, was work done, in the artistic creator’s mind, which gathers, joins, and recreates vestiges of the experienced world—especial emphasis here on the world of nature—which are then recast in a new ‘imaginative’ form, transformed the way a country road is transformed by being calling a ‘ribbon

of moonlight.’ The ancient Greeks—like most ancient culture people-- not only did not have a term with the modern meaning of ‘imagination,’ but inclined to describe literary works in terms of their formal qualities. Thus the epic imagination, as the Greeks understood it, was marked above all by its use of the dactylic hexameter, while the lyric and dramatic, and for that matter the prose genres like philosophy and history, were also distinguishable by the formal vehicles that generated them—the choral odes of tragedy, the distichs or anapests of lyric, the paratactic structures of the prose historians. The dactylic hexameter, consequently, is the first line of affinity between Homer and Hesiod, and a sufficient reason to see lyric and dramatic forms as separate from the epic. It is therefore essential for you to expose yourself both to the sound and the analysis of that dactylic verse form. By choosing Fitzgerald and Lattimore among our translators, not only of Homer but of Hesiod, we come as close as we can in living English translation, to appreciating the sound and import of this epic line.

### *Reading*

*Works and Days, Theogony, and The Shield of Heracles*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (Ann Arbor, 1991.) (Please read in entirety.)

### *Discussion*

There is considerable dispute over the unity of ‘Hesiod.’ (In fact, also over the unity of Homer’s work. Did he compose it all? Is composition the right word, or were the Homeric epics strands of traditional material which were woven together in the late eighth century by an editor or editors?) Do you see a common thread binding together the two epic works of Hesiod? Do you see in those works the marks of a single and singular genius? Or rather of an educated ‘man on the street’?

*General point:* the written papers are where the work of this class takes muscular form. We see what we are doing when we write. Have you started writing? Do you see the larger form of your whole perspective in this class, even though we are barely launched? (Have you read *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*? Covey argues for starting at the end, in any project. Can you do that in this course?) *Remember: suggested paper topics are listed as the ends of Weeks Five, Ten, and Sixteen, but should be consulted well in advance, as aids in your planning.*

## Pindar The Odes

**Is Pindar an epic poet?** Still in the section of our course devoted to the epic imagination, we come with the poetry of Pindar to an animal difficult to classify. Epic, in a sense, the vision of Pindar certainly is. This Theban poet (522-443 B.C.), born well over a century after the writings of Hesiod, and perhaps twice that since the 'Pisistratean recension' that recorded the works of Homer at the end of the eighth century, is in one sense the new individual of the Athenian fifth century, a distinctive stylist, a praiser of glory in the individualist games and races that focused the attention of his contemporaries, and yet at the same time—and here is where the 'epic' comes in—a celebrant above all of the heroic commitment to excellence, and of the heroic male ideal underlying that commitment. The in-between position of Pindar is illustrated by the use he makes of myth in his poetry. Myth there is, everywhere in his *Odes*, and of a consistent piece with the godlike verbal affiliations we find in both Homeric epics, but as often as not Pindar tweaks myth in such a way as to make private use of it.

**The texts and performance of Pindar.** The remaining texts of Pindar have come to us from many manuscripts and palimpsests, and though what remains to us constitutes work carried out over a long period (498-444 B.C.) the totality of what is left is only a fragment of Pindar's huge 'output,' work firmly lodged in the age of writing and parchment replication, and continuously expanding through Pindar's life-role as an invited praiser-poet at games, races, and regal celebrations. (His work was largely occasional, and devoted to praising the *arête*/excellence of victors in contests; doing so for audiences of the educated and wealthy, who were the ones able both to support his creativity and to read and understand his difficult work.) It will not be a surprise, given this performative nature of Pindar's work, on the spot and admiring, that the language structures of that work differ profoundly from those required for Homer and Hesiod, who were (very differently from one another) retailing the epic perspective to audiences far removed from the events or ideas about which they were hearing.

**The conditions of production.** We have mentioned the dactylic hexameter as the vehicle of epic in its initial phase, but in Pindar we face a complex metrical world suited to the music and dance which (we gather) were the production-setting of Pindar's work. The melding of that distinctive metrical world with the thematics of a Pindaric ode represents a new societal world, in which not only were great tales told, but were told in a manner germane to a discursive and democratic society. A look at the first Olympian Ode, for Hiero of Syracuse, should uncover the packaging of such productions.

**The choral dance performance of the First Olympian Ode of Pindar.** The language of this performance, first of all, is not based on a single kind of 'foot,' like the dactyl, but on a counterpoint of iambs with anapests. This counterpoint is distributed by a dance chorus according to the dance steps performed by the presenters of this great ode, which is designed to celebrate the victory of Hiero's chariot in a major chariot race. (It is not the charioteer but the chariot owner who receives the praise here.) The distribution of the contrasting metrical patterns is coordinated with the moves of the dance—during which the ode in question is recited. Those moves are triadic, consisting of three different turns—*strophe* (meaning *turn*), *antistrophe* (meaning *a turn in the opposite direction*), and *epode*, a *stationary summative choral move* in which the tale being narrated/presented is advanced to a new theme.

**The Content of Pindar's First Olympian Ode.** In the case of Pindar's First Olympian Ode, for instance, the challenge is to celebrate the victory of Hiero in a major chariot race at Olympia—one of the first Peloponnesian sites at which the greatest games and festivals of Archaic Greece were held. The ode consists of four triads—four combinations of the three dance modes—and moves through them with a daring brilliance of allusion, which—*please note this carefully*—refers extensively to the nature and fate of the divine Pelops, name giver to the Peloponnesus, whose ivory shoulder is explained in detail, in such a fashion that the divine background of Pelops is brought to an explanation of his own astounding gifts as a charioteer, gifts which, we are given to understand by the end of the ode, apply equally to the charioteer of Hiero, on whom the implications of more than human skill rub off. (There is a detailed account of this detailed narrative in Knox, *The Norton Book of Classical Literature*, pp. 251-258; I recommend that dense but readable survey for insights into how the Pindaric ode is put together.) The conclusion of this ode, noble praise of both King Hiero and of the poet himself, raises the mortal events of a horse race to an epic level--celebrating human greatness which intersects with the immortal--which we noted in placing Pindar



in the same category as Homer. In that regard, however, it is also worth noting that while in Homer events of athletic prowess are described in some detail—as in the encounter of Odysseus with the Phaeacians, which we described in Week Three—in Pindar the actual athletic performance being celebrated is hardly mentioned, embedded as it is in ennobling myth and the drama of the ode dance.

### *Reading*

Pindar, *The Odes*, trans. Bowra (London, 1982).

Pindar, *Odes for Victorious Athletes*, trans. Burnett (Baltimore, 2010).

(Please read all of the Pindaric odes.)

### *Discussion*

Does Pindar belong to the epic tradition, or he is a product of a ‘new society,’ that of fifth century Athens, in which individual achievement—that of great athletes and great impresarios—is of foremost importance?

The concept of *arête*, ‘excellence,’ is central throughout Greek culture. The flaw that brings down the victims of tragedy—which we will read shortly—is the flaw of missing the mark (as in shooting an arrow at a target); while the ability to hit the bull’s eye is the mark of the excellent marksman. Skill, precision, training all go into the making of *arête*, and are exemplified in the skills Pindar sees in his athletes, patrons, and himself as poet. Where do you find that trademark concern with *arête* in Homer?

And, by the way, do we still value that *arête* in contemporary society? Where do you see it? In the Olympic Games? In the Special Olympics?

*Is it right to consider Pindar part of the epic tradition? Is his perspective congruent with those of Homer and Hesiod?*

*Do the Iliad and the Odyssey seem to spring from the same poet? We have treated the two epics as offspring of a single Homer; were we right to do that?*

*What makes the hexameter an appropriate line for the Greek epic? How do you compare it, as a vehicle of expression, with the iambic pentameter line, which is the classic vehicle of extended English language poetry?*

## GREEK LYRICS

*Archilochos*

*Sappho*

*Solo*

*Herondas*

**Overview** 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.

**Archilochos 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 Aegean: '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.

**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.

**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.

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 *follows* 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, 1995).

### **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?

## Archilochos and Sappho

**Lyric imagination and its historical setting.** We have devoted some attention to what we called the epic imagination and the philosophic imagination in ancient Greece. In so doing we have sacrificed chronology and orthodox history, leaving it to the inventive student—armed with a good brief political/social history of ancient Greece—to put the pieces together, observing that Homer’s world is very different from that of Pindar which is equally different from that of Plato. With the present week’s work we return to the so-called Archaic stage of Greek culture, seventh to mid sixth centuries, when the establishment of Homeric poetry in writing was already a fact, the spread of literacy, writing, and accordingly individualism was starting to make itself felt, and the economic and social structures of the fifth century polis were anticipated on the horizon. Archilochos (seventh century B.C.) and Sappho (late seventh--middle sixth century B.C.) will be our guides into this transitional world, and into the world of lyric expression, which is the surest indicator of social and cultural change. We are, ‘suddenly,’ face to face with distinctive and passionate *individuals*, and though they are addressing us in meters as formalized as those of the epic hexameter, these individuals are not channeled by the Muse, but are clearly exposed to us.

**Archilochos as lyric presence.** In discussing the epic tradition we have stressed the importance of the dactylic hexameter (in Homer and Hesiod) and the choral ode (in Pindar), the latter proving to be an innovation rooted in dance and music accompaniments to praise poems. With Archilochos (and the other lyric poets we discuss here) we come into a pluralistic metrical world, in which, though there is ‘direct expression’ of the individual, there are multiple prosodic vehicles for that expression: the *iambic* meter (often, in Archilochos, used for ‘attack’ or ‘invective’ poetry); and various lyric meters, declarative (*trochaics*), *anapestic* (tripping and springing), and *dactylic*, an echo from the epic. This variety of meters, fully exercised in Archilochos, mediates personal expression; we remain far from free verse in the modern sense. And yet we remain immersed in the passions.

**Archilochos 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 Aegean: ‘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—and in that he hardly differed from the Athenians of the fifth century; their lives have to be reconstructed by comments from others, often embedded in texts/papyri reduced to a line or two. 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. Yet as we are looking at the lyric of personal expression, here, we had better take a sharp look. It is true that, in his lyrics which are mostly incomplete, Archilochos gives us content-lines which purport to be autobiographical glimpses, but self-expression in the lyric is not that transparent. The reliability of information given in a lyric is suspect, and must be read in terms of the speaker and the tone of the whole piece. In most cases, if we look closely at the ancient lyric, we will find many reasons to doubt that it is personally revelatory. (Please review the shrewd discussion of this issue by Knox, in the *Norton Book of Classical Literature*, pp. 202-203). Finally, what do you think you can learn about a man from a little poem like the following?

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

**Sappho and her work.** Like Archilochos, the person Sappho (630?-570 B.C.) is hard to reconstruct. (Here, even in the midst of the first expressions of personal feeling in Greek culture, the job of rediscovering whole identities behind the mask is almost impossible.) We get the general picture, from the numerous remaining pieces of her intricate lyrics. 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. And yet we try, as did the American poet and classicist Richmond Lattimore, who boldly tackles the Sapphic stanza form:

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.

### *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, 1995).

(Read all of Sappho and Archilochos! Then explore the poets!)

### *Discussion*

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 you are reading, here and throughout this course? They are important vehicles, no? Are you on the side of literal translation? Have you checked out several different versions of the same poem? (That could be a good paper topic!)

## Solon and Heronda: The Political Lyrics

**Solon and Herondas. What joins them?** With these two poets, we press to the limits the checkerboard quality of the timeframe of this course. But we can turn the oddity into an advantage, by highlighting the dramatic changes Athens underwent from the mid-seventh to mid-sixth century (Solon) to the first half of the third century (Herondas.). In other words, from the very beginning of the Classical Period to the late Hellenistic wind-down of classical Hellenism. We have already looked at the cultural chasm separating, say, the mind of Hesiod (seventh century B.C) from that of Plato (d. 348 B.C.) three hundred years later. What did we find there? Hesiod works wholeheartedly inside an integral, archaic and formalized tradition of expression, while Plato—and this appears even in our limited readings, *The Apology* and *The Republic*—works out into a wide ranging and daring topography of new thoughts and theories, his voice, even through the dialogue form, coming across as subtly aware of the ‘modern person-world.’ Something of the same contrast links Solon and Herondas, both of whom were poets, and concerned, though very differently, with the landscape of social behavior. Solon, as distinguished lawgiver/poet, wrote in curried elegiac couplets about the new laws he instituted for the city of Athens, and the benefits he brought to civil order, self-control and rule of law—all of which he actually did; while Herondas, long after Athens had shown what a marvelous democracy it was capable of mounting, though for a brief century, looks with a jaundiced *oeil critique* at the foibles and oddities of his own time, as they are reflected in his home island of Kos and (probably) in travels to Egyptian Alexandria, a center of culture and trends.

**Solon.** The outburst of fine lyric, in the thawing Archaic Age of Greece, seventh century, 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 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. Mime One, which is fascinatingly translated by Douglass Parker in Knox, pp. 566-571, 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 *follows* the great achievements of classical culture. The work of Herondas is baroque, as distinguished from Renaissance, or camp as distinguished from naïve, or postmodern as distinguished from modern. 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**

The following website offers the Solon translations by John Lewis. They are pretty good. (Plenty of other choices, though, as you will see by brosing the web). [www.classicalideals.com/Solon%20Poetry.htm](http://www.classicalideals.com/Solon%20Poetry.htm)[http://www.bing.com/search?q=solon poems in translation&pc=conduit&ptag=G445-A2B968EED61704F77B3F&form=CONTLB&conlogo=CT3210127&ShowAppsUI=1r](http://www.bing.com/search?q=solon+poems+in+translation&pc=conduit&ptag=G445-A2B968EED61704F77B3F&form=CONTLB&conlogo=CT3210127&ShowAppsUI=1r)

For Herondas, cf. Davenport, *Seven Greeks*, which we used in our reading for the preceding week.

Please read all that remains of these two poets!

*Discussion*

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?

*Are you convinced that early epic and early philosophy spring from the same root? Or do you see the epic and the philosophic imaginations as from the beginning seriously different?*

*Do you see a connection between Socrates' thought and that of the Pre Socratics? What is it?*

*To what extent do the early Greek lyric, and the political poetry of Solon and Herondas, give insights into the personalities of their creators?*